

# ...Sir Rodric Braithwaite

## A lesson in perestroika and its aftermath

Sir Rodric Braithwaite, (British Ambassador to Moscow from 1988-92 and author of three major books on Russian issues, the last entitled *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89*) has lived in the Suburb since the age of five – notwithstanding a career that took him and his late wife Jill around the world for long spells.

His father was a musician and a conductor at Sadlers Wells. In 1937 when Rodric was five years old, his parents, assisted by his grandfather, bought 23 Linden Lea and from then until the age of seven he walked to and from King Alfred School though he was to finish his schooling at Bedales. From there he went into the army where, when only eighteen, he worked in military intelligence in Vienna and his natural talent for languages and existing knowledge of German proved to be of real value. From the army to Cambridge where he graduated with a first class degree in French and Russian and went into the Diplomatic Service.

Rodric Braithwaite has retained his love for the Suburb (and is a committed North of the River man). He recalls that until the late 1940s-50s, Linden Lea and most other Suburb roads were unpaved and there were few cars. He heard German quite a bit when a child as there were so many Jewish refugees moving into the Suburb from Nazi Germany

including their next door neighbours. At that time sheep grazed on land that is now occupied by large blocks of flats facing the fields that were part of a former Express Dairy Farm (bordered by Arden Road). He thinks that Dame Henrietta Barnett made serious mistakes in her conception of the Suburb by disallowing any shops and public houses in Central Square, the original centre of the old Suburb as this would have created a more vibrant hub. As the Suburb expanded north towards East Finchley, the Market Place on the main road dividing the two halves provided essential shops.

Sir Rodric met his late wife Jill while they were both working in the diplomatic service in Poland; she had to give up her job and a promising career in the service when they married. When asked if she was very disappointed Jill said that she had been brought up to expect that. How times and expectations change! After starting their married life in London in a 'dismal' flat in Golders Green they bought a house in Temple Fortune Lane in 1967 and then in 1975 moved to the house in which he still lives in Hampstead Way, though sadly Jill died in November 2008 after a year-long illness. During my conversation Sir Rodric often mentioned her vital contribution to his life and career with great love, admiration and affection;

they had five children though tragically one died when very young. He now has four grandchildren and his daughter has moved in to live with him and they have many visitors who come to stay.

Was it difficult having a life in the service and different postings abroad? Sir Rodric agreed the family had to cope with "quite a lot of moves though not as many as some," the children had all gone to boarding school as a result. By contrast, his son, also a career diplomat was adopting a different strategy and was educating his own children in local day schools. Their last move was the important appointment as British Ambassador to Moscow in 1988 until 1992: this proved to be a very 'interesting' time during which the Soviet Union and its empire collapsed very rapidly and a struggle ensued between the Soviet Communist Old Guard and Boris Yeltsin's take over. Jill went with her Russian friends to the barricades to support Yeltsin as gun fire was blasting nearby.

"Not the usual role of an Ambassador's wife but I was rather proud of her."

Sir Rodric received his knighthood in 1994. He continues to take an active interest in Russian political affairs and has written three major books which reflect his knowledge of Russian history, people and politics: 'Across the



*Moscow River: the World Turned Upside Down'* (2002); *'Moscow 1941: A City and its People at War'* (2006) and *'Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-1989'* (2011). As he reminded me, "We in Britain lost our empire gradually over many years and we are still adjusting to our reduced role in the World. Russia lost its empire much more recently and very suddenly and is having to come to terms with its change in circumstances and loss of influence and domination and territory."

On spies and spying. "I knew from my time in Vienna that I didn't want a career in intelligence, though the Russians probably thought I was a spy. Their spies were relatively easy to identify – they were the brightest ones who, unlike the regular Soviet diplomats, were allowed to go out and about, and whom you met in unexpected places."

On Burgess and Maclean: "They should have been sacked years before they defected – for drunkenness and incompetence."

Lastly, why the Suburb? Do you stay for passive or for positive reasons?

He laughed. "A bit of both. It's very difficult and a lot of bother to clear the house and sell up and it's a very pleasant place to live – so I will stay."

Sir Rodric was a patron of the Suburb centenary celebrations in 2007 and is one of the patrons of the Proms at St Jude's.

# Garden Suburb Design Guidance

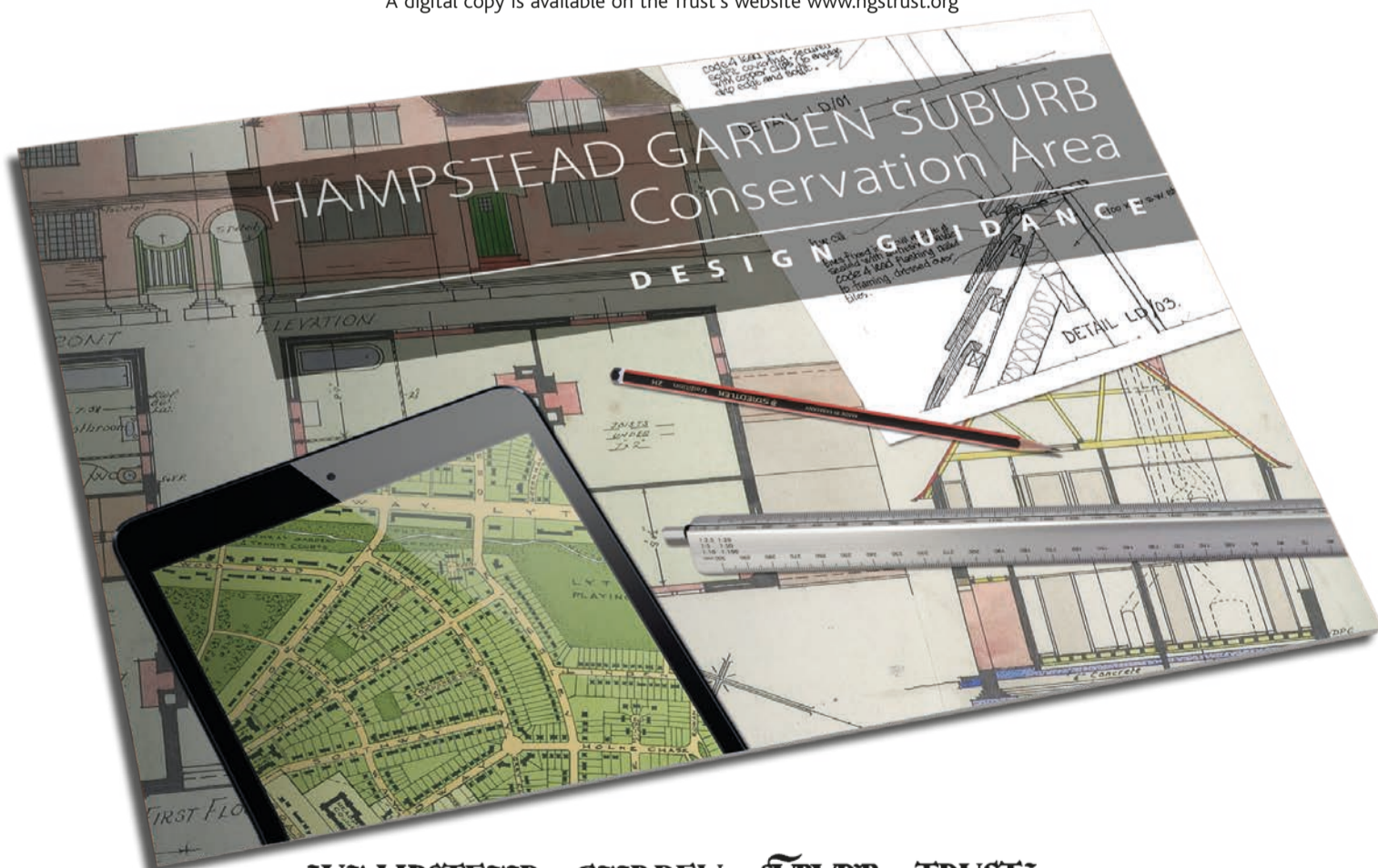
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