

# LEE MANOR SOCIETY



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## Annual Review – October 2022

The slow but sure recovery from the blight of COVID continues and your Society has managed re-establish the programme of regular monthly meetings at which we discuss matters of relevance to the Conservation Area. Our summarised objective, as laid out in the Constitution, is to ‘maintain and enhance’ the character of the area and we have been delighted to review and support proposals that have fulfilled this objective.

### Planning applications

Amongst several notable examples, the Old Vicarage in Handen Road has been sensitively restored as far as possible to the original appearance and a very good result has been achieved. On this positive note, Lewisham Council’s publication of the **Alterations and Extensions supplementary planning document** has made life that much easier because it removes a large amount of subjectivity as to what is, and what is not permitted. However, there have been some quite egregious proposals where we have made our opposition very clear, but we are nevertheless aware that by appearing only as an objector to planning applications we can be mischaracterised as being purely negative.

The Society reviews dozens of planning applications every year and sometimes objects when a proposal, we think, is damaging to the character of the Conservation Area. It can be easy to dismiss objections by conservation groups such as ours as the work of nimbys opposed to any change. In reality planning is more of an art than a science and council planning guidance that appears quite clear on the printed page can be ignored by planning officers and planning committees on what often appear to be rather flimsy grounds. If neighbourhoods are worth preserving, and the council clearly believes this is worth doing because

it has created more than 20 Conservation Areas over the past 50 years, then they need to be defended. Quite small changes can cumulatively do severe damage to an area’s character. At one recent planning committee hearing a councillor, who had opposed the Society’s objection, proudly claimed that he did not believe in conservation areas and people should be allowed to do what they wanted. He was clearly not judging the application or our objection to it on its merits and should not have sat on any planning committee.

### Leegate redevelopment

Objection cannot be an emotional reaction which will not gain traction, but a thorough discussion of the issues involved. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the proposals for the development of **Leegate** by Galliard Homes. The proposed development is immediately adjacent to the Conservation Area, which it will overshadow. We feel that such a massive structure will overpower an eclectic assortment of four storey notable buildings, some listed, including the Fire Station, the former Police Station and the two Tiger’s Head public houses.

There are aspects of the proposal that we welcome, notably the creation of a public square facing on to Burnt Ash Road and a new public street on the southern boundary (Carston Close). We recognise the need for more housing, though not on this scale, and for the replacement of the existing run-down 1960s centre. But we also have serious reservations. The developer, Galliard, talks of its wish to ‘transform’ the Lee Green crossroads. It will certainly do that. The local shopping parades and the leafy and suburban surroundings of the crossroads will be dominated by a retail hub excessive in both height and mass. If Leegate is redeveloped on this scale it will inevitably set a precedent for other sites surrounding the

crossroads, in particular the currently low-level Sainsbury's supermarket, should that be redeveloped.

The devastating impact of Lewisham's present policy on high-rise, intensive development can be seen only too clearly in the town centre redevelopment which has created gloomy canyons of tall blocks surrounding a minute riverside park. The pedestrian experience at pavement level is unpleasant. Excessive heights at Leegate will create a similar canyon effect over the crossroads reducing the appeal of the local shops. Other recent residential developments, including the blocks running from Catford Bridge to Ladywell Fields, have been carried out on a much more human scale at around eight storeys, not the 15 proposed at Leegate. Historically much high-rise development has been set in landscaped surroundings that soften their impact (examples are the Lewisham Park blocks and – in Greenwich – Leybridge Court.).

Galliard has made use of specialist consultants in preparing its bid. We highlight two: One, covering the impact of the proposed redevelopment on nearby heritage assets, strains the English language to justify the scheme while a closer reading of its assessments reveals problems. The second interprets the findings of Galliard's public consultation in a way that stretches credulity, shows a poor grasp of simple arithmetic and undermines the democratic process and the credibility of this application. In matters of consultation, Lewisham's planning department has performed poorly.

The late-lamented Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) urged planning departments to assist objectors where possible given the asymmetrical nature of the resources available to the two sides. We have met with silence from the planners. We have a serious problem with the height proposed for the north-west crossroads corner and the south-east corner. These are for buildings of respectively 15 and 13 storeys. This compares with heights of ten and eight storeys in the original St Modwen plan, heights that were retained in the revised St Modwen plan of 2017.

In general, we have also questioned why some proposals are accepted which can only be justified by reference to new legislation yet to be adopted: The reason given is that the review process is timetabled and that an active review cannot be delayed for the advent of new regulations. The reasons given are legal but one still gets the feeling that the systems are being played to our disadvantage.

### **The Ice House in Manor House Gardens**

The Lee Manor Society welcomed its 30,000th visitor to the Manor House Gardens Ice House on April 17, 2022.



*Sian Ruddick, the 30,000th visitor, with mother Izzy*

The Ice House in the grounds of the Manor House Lee has been open for the past 22 years following its reopening by the Society in the Millennium Year 2000. Although the Society was keen to bring the Ice House back to life we had no idea how popular it would prove over the long term. It was possible, we feared, that after the lengthy queues that built up on the opening day in June 2000, interest would die away and we would be left with a fine but once again forgotten building. That has not proved to be the case. Stalwart support for the project from Society members has meant we have opened every

summer since. From April to September every year we are open for the first and third Sundays of the month between 3pm and 5pm. On warm summer days and cold early Spring and late Autumn days Society volunteers staff a welcome table and explain to visitors the workings of the Ice House and its history.



*Manor House Gardens Festival – a view from the hill*

Built in 1773 to serve the wealthy owners of the Manor House, the Ice House, as its name suggests, provided ice to the big house to preserve foodstuffs and for table decorations made from carved ice. Ice would have been cut from the lake in the gardens and packed into the egg-shaped ice well under ground. Straw packing round the ice and several wooden doors to reduce air movement would have kept the ice solid for at least a year. Until the invention of mechanical refrigeration, powered by gas or electricity, the options for preserving food were limited. Ice was one option alongside salting, pickling or smoking. Canning emerged later. Reopening the ice house had long been an ambition of the Society but the spread of Victorian London meant access was only possible through the back gardens of the houses on Manor Lane. Creating a new means of access was a challenge. A spiral staircase down from the park was one option considered as was a gently sloping path through the park though this would have taken up a lot of space. We finally opted for a staircase leading down to a

newly created opening in the Ice House wall. Mounds of rubbish were cleared from the chambers and the rough soil floor smoothed and covered in brick. Funds were raised from The Pilgrim Trust, Heritage of London Trust, The Heritage Lottery Fund, Lewisham Borough and local residents.

We closed an enjoyable season by participating in **Open House London** when we welcomed visitors from far afield.

### **Plant Mart and Garden Party**

We restored our annual festival to its regular format and returned also to our traditional May date. It is our main fund raiser and it turned into a great success with an array of seasonal plants being sold alongside many stalls for cakes, refreshments, bric-à-brac and books. It is also an important social occasion to which all are welcome: many people stayed on to meet up with old friends and neighbours and told us how much they enjoyed the event - this made it all the more worthwhile.

### **Trees and Tree Walks**

We have continued our programme of Spring and Autumn Tree Walks, led by Charles Batchelor and David Ford, taking in the wide variety of trees in Manor House Gardens and in our local streets. These walks have revealed the astonishing variety of trees in the neighbourhood, many from exotic climes. Manor House Gardens and several local back gardens contain examples of mature cider gums, a eucalyptus that is a native of the mountainous regions of Tasmania and southern Australia. These trees can reach an enormous size and not really suited to back gardens but are well adapted to the dryer summers we may face. Even more exotic are the varieties of palm tree that feature in many local gardens. The dwarf fan-palm is a popular choice with, as its name suggests, fan-like, stiff leaves sprouting from a hairy trunk. The tree produces sprays of delicate creamy white flowers that produce date-like fruits though these are hard and inedible. The fan-palm is a transplant from the Mediterranean coast first brought to Britain in the 1730s. It is hard to distinguish from the Chusan palm, a Chinese native, though the Mediterranean tree has fewer leaf segments in each

fan - 12-15 against 50. A third exotic introduction – though not strictly a palm – is the cabbage palm, a slender multi-stemmed tree with a smooth bark unlike the rough, fibrous trunks of true palms. The spiky leaves of the cabbage palm form bunched clusters, unlike the flat fan-like leaves of the two other varieties. It is native of New Zealand. The appeal of all three trees is that while dry leaves are shed they are evergreens that retain their shape throughout the year.

We have been granted £3,000 of council funds to plant more street trees this winter season. Our focus this time is the avenue of trees along Burnt Ash Road which is part of the Conservation Area. We have previously secured the planting of young oaks, walnuts and beeches among the existing mature limes, sycamores, robinias and horse chestnuts.



*Cabbage Palm*

We were successful recently in persuading the council’s Tree Officer to resist the removal of a front garden boundary lime and a sycamore in Burnt Ash Road. Amicable agreement was reached with the owner to retain the two trees.

The avenue, which forms part of the council’s green corridor running from Blackheath to Grove Park, is a mix of street trees and trees in private gardens. It is, however, vulnerable to damage from parked cars which compact the soil and limit water permeation.

### **Lee Manor Community Garden**

A small band of dedicated volunteers has been working on the Community Garden throughout the year and, as you can imagine, it has been difficult because of the long hot drought. The garden was once a Council depot and has a concrete floor on which we have built raised planters but these have been difficult to maintain because of the weather and the hosepipe ban. Nevertheless, we had a successful harvest of onions earlier during the season and there was a delightful crop of a charlotte potatoes.

Wooden planters do not last for ever and a planned rotation of repairs is operated to keep them in good condition.

### **Manor House Library**

Simon Higgs, Manager of the Manor House and Library reports that the building celebrates 250 years this year and various celebratory events will take place between now and the end of the year. An online and in-library crowd funder will take place to raise money for some much-needed reparations to parts of the building and grounds, including new mountings for the much-loved canon and a new permanent sign exploring some of the history of the building, funded in part by The Mayor of London’s ‘untold stories’ grant. There will also be a poetry competition for young people, a weekend of gardening to try and tame and clear the front gardens, and a reading by Richard Atkinson from his book about his ancestors and their time living in the house as friends and tenants of the Baring family.