

THE BRIXTON SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Autumn issue, October 2023

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Lambeth Heritage Month

A tremendous level of engagement across Lambeth for the month of September for the annual Lambeth Heritage month. Many events sold out or oversubscribed. Brixton Society Committee member Ashleigh Gill gives her account of the Local History Fair and a few other events on Page 4.

Urban sketching with the Brixton Society Led by Nick Weedon and Ashleigh Gill from the Brixton Society. There was lots of positive feedback from organisers and attendees of this new type of event, so we will likely be repeating it in 2024.

The Measures Brothers, South London Orchid growers and collectors

Tracey Gregory, Committee member and local historian, continues her research into South London orchid growers and collectors. She was invited to talk at St Leonards Church for the Streatham Society about the Measures family, their orchid collections and business interests around Streatham and Myatt's Fields/Camberwell. Very well attended and brought together branches of the Measures family who had not met for some time. Local Hero and orchid painter Nelly Roberts became the first and longest serving orchid artist for the Royal Horticultural Society. Her talent as an artist was first discovered by the Measures family.

"Isn't it a joy to Dance and Sing"

This talk about Lambeth and Music Hall by Brixton Society member and Music Hall historian and Vice Chair of the British Music Hall Society, Alison Young on 7th September was so well attended we had to use the larger Library space at Brixton. A fascinating glimpse into the past when Brixton and Lambeth were home to many music hall entertainers. The Empress Theatre played a key part and was host to some weird and wonderful acts. We learnt about troupes of elephants, contortionists, and many more.



Doye Akinlade and Diana Linskey for The Brixton Society at the Local History Fair, West Norwood Library & Picture House. 02 Sep 2023. Photo by Maria Kwofie

Diary of Events –Autumn/Winter 2023

Market Walks

Normally on the second Saturday of the month, £5 a head, including booklet, RV 2-30 pm in Brixton Station Road. Please book via:

www.brixtonsociety.org.uk/events

The next walk is on Sat 11 Nov

Committee Dates

Our Executive Committee meets monthly, at 7 pm on the second Thursday, to plan activities and agree our response to current issues. Meetings are at the Vida Walsh Centre, 2b Saltoun Road SW2, facing Windrush Square. These meetings are open to any of our members, but if you want to join in or to raise a specific issue, please contact the Chair or Secretary a week prior at info@brixtonsociety.org.uk

The next meeting is on Thu 9 Nov

Loughborough Junction (LJ) Neighbourhood Forum

The LJ Neighbourhood Forum formally launches its campaign to get a lift at Loughborough Junction station.

You can get more information and show your support by signing the petition, at the below link. The forum has also commissioned a poster and leaflet which they plan to distribute outside the station.

<https://www.change.org/p/a-lift-for-loughborough-junction-station>

The Forum meets the last Wednesday of every month at 7p.m. at The Platform Cafe, 2 Ridgway Road, SW9 8TP.

The next meeting is on Wed 25 Oct.

Friends of Windmill Gardens

“Spooky Halloween” for families (From their website) A family friendly afternoon with lantern carving, spooky stories in the windmill (1.30pm and 2.45pm) and scary crafts with Kids Kreate.

Also a Monster Cookies workshop for parents and children (booking essential) is on the same day. 29 October

For details of these and the many other activities at the Windmill, please see <https://www.brixtonwindmill.org/>

Gresham College Black History Month

This year's three-part series of lectures for Black History Month, is available to view for free online. The series focuses on Black writing. Click on the individual links to access each lecture or click on the below link to view all of Gresham College's past lectures that are

available online. Over 2,500 videos covering a broad range of topics.

<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/series/>
(From their website)

Gresham College has been providing free public education across the arts and sciences since 1597 when Sir Thomas Gresham's executors founded the college to bring the 'new learning' to Londoners, in English rather than Latin (the language of universities for most of Europe at that time). It was the first Institute of Higher Education in London.

Writing after Windrush - Dr Malachi McIntosh
<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/whats-on/writers-windrush>

Women of the Harlem Renaissance - Professor Kate Dossett

<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/whats-on/women-harlem>

Literary Activism in Contemporary Africa - Professor Madhu Krishnan

<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/whats-on/literary-africa>

Art4Space

(From their website) Art4Space is an award-winning not-for-profit community interest company (CIC) founded and run by professional artists with more than 20 years' experience, using art and creativity as a catalyst for change, to empower our community to be diverse and inclusive. Details of their extensive and diverse events can be found here:

<https://www.art4space.co.uk/whats-on/>

Beautiful & Useful Craft Fair.

Garden Museum. 5 Lambeth Palace Road, SE1 7LB. Sun 3 Dec 2023

This festive season the Beautiful & Useful Craft Fair will gather a botanically inspired collection of Britain's best designer-makers selling handmade gifts including ceramics, textiles, art prints, jewellery, and homewares. Entry is £5 or free for Garden Museum friends.

<https://gardenmuseum.org.uk/events/beautiful-useful-craft-fair-2023/>

Myatt's Fields Park

The Myatt's Fields Park Project organises events and regular community activities in and around Myatt's Fields. Recently this included a dog show that raised over £1200 to develop the dog exercise area in the park.

The below link gives more information about their activities

<https://www.myattsfieldspark.info/>

Diary of Events –Autumn/Winter 2023

Brockwell Park Community Greenhouses

As well as workshops on gardening and a range of events for children, there are gigs at the Greenhouses. The next one is Lade Nade on November 12th from 5.30pm to 8.30pm <https://www.brockwellgreenhouses.org.uk/event/gig-at-the-greenhouses-with-lade-nade/> Their Harvest Festival is on Sundays 29 October. Tickets are free but should be booked in advance.

<https://www.brockwellgreenhouses.org.uk/event/harvest-festival/>

Read more about this community organisation and additional events here: <https://www.brockwellgreenhouses.org.uk/>

Brixton Society Christmas Cards – Goldilocks and the Three Bears

We have produced a colourful Christmas card featuring a playbill from the Empress Theatre for their 1949 Xmas Pantomime Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Each card is A5 size and printed on heavy (350gsm) card. The cards (and envelopes, included) are priced at £5 for a pack of five. If you receive a copy of this newsletter through your letter box delivered by us, not the postman, we should be able to deliver cards to you locally or they can be paid for and collected postage free from Stockwell by arrangement. Contact publications@brixtonsociety.org.uk Payment can be made and postal orders placed from our eBay shop via the following link: <https://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/256270791144> We are also planning to have a stall at the Windmill Winter Fair on the afternoon of 10 December so you can visit us and buy direct there.



A few photos from out and about at the Lambeth Heritage Festival

Some of the participants in Urban Sketching. Photo by Nick Weedon, 17



Sep 2023

One of the sketches from Urban Sketching. Photo by Nick Weedon, 17 Sep 2023



Glimpse of the well-attended talk on music halls at the Brixton Library. Photo by Bill Linskey. 7 Sep 2023

Heritage Focus

Local History Fair

Touring around Lambeth, the Lambeth Local History Fair is part of a month-long festival led by Lambeth Archives and the Lambeth Local History Forum, packed full of local history events. This year the Fair was hosted by West Norwood Library and Picture House Cinema.

This was the first time I had taken part and they couldn't have made it easier for me. It was a superb opportunity to explore some of Lambeth's history under one roof, just a short bus ride from Brixton, in one event-packed day. The library is worth a visit for the architecture alone; a light and airy library designed by Ted Hollamby and his team in 1965-69, it reopened with the addition of the cinema in 2018.

Turnout was great, busy from start to finish with little peaks as events started and ended, all choreographed by Robert Holden, vice-chair of the Forum, whose loud hailer announced each event as it started so I didn't miss a thing. Local History Fair visitors merged with kids club cinema goers, the Saturday chess club and general library users throughout the day.



Brixton Society stall

Local amenity societies tables, including the Brixton Society, displayed independent publications, postcards and merchandise and I spent the whole day there, with a continuous supply of talks, walks, local films and lunch in the cafe. Many events were free and drop-in.

I enjoyed a compilation of local films curated by the Norwood Forum spanning Norwood from the 1940's to a recent and entertaining

conversation between Sarah Pascoe and Romesh Ranganathan in Norwood's Electric Cafe.

After lunch I joined Jon Newman's River Effra walk, starting in West Norwood's Cemetery, where I discovered you can see the impression the River Effra left behind long after it was rerouted away from the cemetery to be absorbed into Bazelgette's London sewage system. Jon helpfully dispelled some local myths - it is most unlikely that coffins slipped into the Effra and Queen Elizabeth did not sail up the river in a royal barge to meet Edward Alleyn - at this point the Effra simply was not big enough.



Walk through Norwood Cemetery

Brixton Society continued to support of the Heritage Festival throughout September with walks, talks and events in Brixton:

- Isn't it a joy to dance and sing (Brixton's Music Hall heritage);
- Brixton Market Heritage Walk;
- Urban sketching with the Brixton Society;
- Tracing the River Effra walk;
- Stockwell Green walk.

If you didn't manage to catch all the events this time, don't worry, our website houses our calendar of new, upcoming events for you to sign up to and you can look out for the heritage fair when it returns in September 2024.

Ashleigh Gill.

Business in Brixton

Brixton BID seeks renewal

Business ratepayers within the Business Improvement District (BID) have been invited to vote on continuation of the BID for another 5-year term. Voting closes shortly, on 18th October. Businesses pay a small percentage on their business rates to support the BID's programme of activities. One limitation of the scheme is that smaller firms working from shared workspace or from home don't have a vote, though some manage to get involved in BID activities regardless.

For the past 10 years, the BID has promoted Brixton and lobbied on behalf of local firms. In the past couple of years, the BID has become more involved in providing extra street cleaning and security, as well as providing training courses and recycling services for members. Last year, it launched a twinning scheme with its counterpart BID in Harlem in New York City, hosting 10 events this August.

There are several themed sub-groups including an Evening and Night-time Economy Forum, a Black Business steering group and a Distinctive Destination steering group. For more details of their work, see their website, www.brixtonbid.co.uk

Workspace in Brixton

Historical background

Brixton has been a centre for employment since the area became built-up following the arrival of the railways in the 1860s. For many years this was dominated by shopping, from market stalls to department stores, but the early 20th century saw more factories and service industries replace the grander houses along the main roads. Entertainment, from pubs to music halls to cinemas, employed many people too, while public services, from transport to health, grew after 1945.

Offices were slower to appear, originally the upper floors of shops used for solicitors or accountants, but a few dedicated office blocks appeared in the 1950s, like Blue Star House on Stockwell Road. Hambrook House on Brixton Hill was nominally the offices for the Amalgamated Construction Equipment works

where Tesco now stands on Acre Lane, but in practice most of their office space was let to others, even before their factory closed in 1967.



Hambrook House, on the corner of Brixton Hill and Porden Road, since replaced by blocks of flats to finance the new Civic Centre.

DL/BS-BTC-V09-006.jpg

As part of the original deal to build the Recreation Centre, International House was to be occupied by Tarmac Construction as their head office, but this was no longer needed once Tarmac were taken over by another firm. Eventually the space was taken by BT, in turn replaced by a series of Lambeth Council departments. For decades, most demand for offices in Brixton was to accommodate Council staff, but their numbers have declined over the past 20 years.

Changing Needs

What we have never had in Brixton is demand for large corporate offices. Major firms have always preferred Central London, with Canary Wharf as a substitute in this century. Their back office functions might be outposted to Croydon for a choice of office blocks at lower rents, but most town centres within Greater London only cater for local needs. Thus when Hondo proposed a 19-storey office tower in Popes Road, among many defects in the design, it made no commercial sense. The planning application was published in Spring 2020, just as Covid restrictions were calling the whole concept of large offices into question.

For several years, the Society's Planning sub-committee have been looking critically at all

Business in Brixton

proposals for new or refurbished workspace, to ensure that it meets local needs. Too often, we have seen token workspace inserted below new flats to satisfy Lambeth planners, but it excludes many potential occupiers because their work generates noise or fumes or waste which would annoy residents above, or needs to operate beyond the conventional working day.

Yet there is demand from small start-up businesses, particularly in creative fields, but they are looking for small self-contained units or shared workspace rather than big office floorplates.

On paper, Lambeth Council has recognised this, through its Brixton Economic Action Plan of 2017 and its Brixton Creative Enterprise Zone report of 2018. Sadly, Lambeth planners have short memories and were too easily led astray by the sheer quantity of old-style office space in the proposed Hondo Tower.

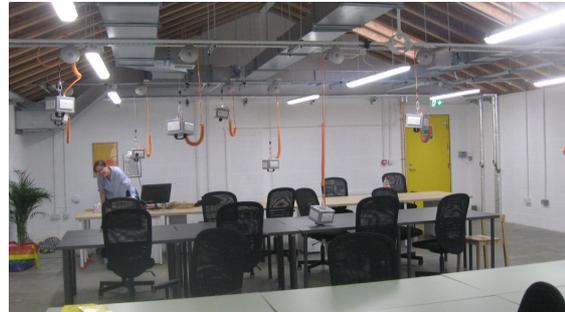
Modern Workspace

The slow collective recovery from Covid and key skills shortages have accelerated changes in office design. Expectations now are that a large office development will include an atrium or generous shared foyer space with at least a refreshment counter so that building users can mix informally. There should be generous cycle parking, preferably with changing and shower facilities for those cycling to work. Larger employers are looking for buildings with green credentials and lower running costs, while at the other end of the scale, shared workspaces are now an established type catering for freelancers and start-ups.

The Hondo Tower ignored these trends and just reworked a residential tower design from 130 William Street in New York, belying their ultimate ambitions.

Within office suites, there should be not just rows of desks but rather a range of spaces, including informal break-out lounges, more meeting rooms than in the past, and small sound-proof booths for concentrated work or smaller confidential meetings. Outdoor space and roof terraces are sought after, and even indoors, there has been an upsurge in demand for office plants and landscaping. All this has

been driven by the need to encourage staff to spend more time in the office after habitual working from home, and to provide an office environment which helps attract and retain new staff, particularly the footloose with key skills.



Spartan shared workspace within LJ Works is one way to keep rents affordable. IMG0770.jpg

There is still a need for “maker space” too, where messy or noisy processes can be carried out safely and without annoying the neighbours. LJ Works is a rare example which tries to meet this need. Railway arches were traditionally the affordable locations for small workshops but now are threatened by the Arch Company’s ambitions to turn them into upmarket retail or leisure destinations.

Alan Piper.

Newsletter back numbers

Over the years, our newsletters have ranged over local planning and amenity issues, in addition to many snippets of local history. It’s striking that many topics run on across several editions of the newsletter.

Some old newsletters can be found on our website, but ongoing work to compile an index to them all tends to stall every time there is a controversial planning case or because we are busy with a local event.

The Secretary retains a small stock of old newsletters, going back beyond the turn of the century, so if you missed or lost an earlier edition, we may be able to help with a paper copy. In some cases, individual pages can be sent digitally as Word files.

If you are trying to locate an earlier article or edition, please get in touch and we will try to assist, at info@brixtonsociety.org.uk



*The Recreation Centre, Brixton Station Road
IMG0526.jpg*

Town Centre Roundup

A meeting of the Brixton Neighbourhood Forum on 25 September reviewed the state of play in the Town Centre:

International House

The long-term aim is to refurbish International House, with modern services and improved energy efficiency.

Its “meanwhile” use as workspace has been extended to mid-December next year, and 3Space are actively seeking new tenants to fill the gaps where others have already moved out. **Pop Brixton** has been granted a similar extension, in both cases to keep the sites active while **London Square**, the appointed developers, prepare planning applications.

Atlantic Road

In pre-Covid times, much work had been done on redesigning this road to reduce congestion while enabling delivery access to the arcades and to shops in Electric Avenue. Attention was diverted by the subsequent focus on Low Traffic Neighbourhoods but the Brixton BID is interested in reviving the scheme.

The slow re-letting of the shops in the railway arches remains a brake on the revival of trade in both Atlantic and Station Roads. More “pop-up” uses like the Empathy Museum might help, but they need to be for longer periods than 6 weeks, or better still if rents were reduced to tempt traders back.

Brixton Station Road

Creating workspace below the Recreation Centre is well underway – this is behind the shops and accessed from Beehive Place. Photofusion is expected to move into part of

this space around Christmas time, and the Advocacy Academy may follow in early 2024. New shopfronts are being provided for the shops, with GLA funding. In contrast with the Arch Company’s mismanagement of the railway arches, traders have the chance to move within the Rec frontage without steep rent increases. Thus Brixtonia will move to the former LVAC volunteer bureau at the Popes Road corner.

In parallel, illuminated signage on the Rec will be restored, and five trees will be planted along the street in the New Year.

No news yet if **Hondo** will try again to develop the Popes Road site, now other stakeholders are more alert to the issues.

Somerleyton Road

Despite last year’s completion of the Brixton House Theatre, and conversion of Carlton Mansions to small workspace units, the rest of the land alongside the railway line has remained in limbo. Lambeth Councillors had brushed aside a proposal from Brixton Green to develop this as 100% affordable housing, and instead entrusted its development to their Homes for Lambeth subsidiary, which did nothing. Meanwhile, the owner of a factory site halfway along obtained his own planning permission for housing development, and Lambeth failed to buy back the land for the original larger-scale scheme.

Lambeth’s Scrutiny Committee recently made a rare expression of concern at the delay, and in a belated rush to get a private developer on board, the Council now appears willing to reduce the share of affordable housing from their usual 50% to only 30%.

Further afield

Beyond the core shopping centre, it’s also worth noting that Lambeth Archives is in the process of moving into new premises on Brixton Hill on the site of Olive Morris House. To the east, the Brixton Domino Club and the Soup Kitchen are moving back into their restored premises on Coldharbour Lane, while LJ Works were completed earlier this year on Loughborough Road, with much of the space already taken.

“Traffic in Towns” report 60 years on

In response to steadily-increasing car ownership in the early 1960s, the Government commissioned Professor Colin Buchanan to report on how rising urban traffic should be planned for. His report appeared in 1963 and was widely influential on town planning and transport policies. It introduced stronger separation between pedestrians and vehicles, as well as a hierarchy of roads for through traffic, “local distributor routes” between neighbourhoods, and quieter routes for deliveries and access to homes and shops.

For high-density town centres, it suggested pedestrian movement via high-level walkways above the vehicle traffic. This idea was taken up enthusiastically by Lambeth planners in their late-1960s plans for Brixton Town Centre, which was also intended to have 9 multi-storey car parks. It was also followed in the original design of the Angell Town and Stockwell Park estates, which were just being completed 50 years ago.

Another planned feature was a “Brixton by-pass” or local distributor road to connect Loughborough Junction with Camberwell New Road via Loughborough, Akerman and Lothian Roads. This was tied in with building several new housing estates between Myatt’s Fields Park and Brixton Road. This massive plan was inevitably slow-moving, and the final link through to Camberwell New Road was never made, due to fading enthusiasm and dwindling resources by the mid-1970s.

To the Londoner of the sixties, it was plans for urban motorways which regularly made the headlines, even though these grew out of the 1944 Abercrombie County of London Plan rather than Buchanan’s report. A series of ring roads were intended, in addition to extending several motorways into the London area. The South Cross Route was due to cross Brixton west-to-east, intersecting with an extended M23 immediately east of Loughborough Junction. Rising public opposition saw most of the plans ditched when Labour gained control of the Greater London Council in 1973, leaving

just the outer ring or M25 beyond London’s boundary.

Locally, the Southwyck House “barrier block” on Coldharbour Lane is a relic which was designed so its flats would largely face away from the motorway noise.

For modern readers, Buchanan’s report had surprisingly little to say about cycling. Its recent revival has been driven by the twin aims of reducing pollution and travel costs, as well as encouraging exercise, but cyclists remain vulnerable on main roads optimised for motor traffic.

An important element of Buchanan’s report was how to deal with freight traffic in urban areas, particularly for servicing shops in town centres. Planners have struggled with this aspect, even before the surge in home deliveries post-Covid. An inherent problem is that delivery firms find it more economical to dispatch goods from provincial warehouses in larger lorries which then struggle to find their way through market towns built for the horse and cart.

Despite years of planners’ advocating “last mile” delivery by smaller vehicles, delivery firms have always resented the extra cost of re-loading from their big trucks. During the 1970s and 80s, major retailers preferred to relocate to main road sites with generous parking, weakening the appeal of older town centres.

Only recently has the shift to on-line ordering for home delivery encouraged a shift to smaller vehicles, mopeds and pedal-powered vans for that last mile. There are also pilot schemes for delivery by self-propelled robot ice-boxes, trundling along footpaths, or even helicopter drones (but that’s a story for another day).

Alan Piper.

The campaign against the London Motorways pre-dated the formation of the Brixton Society, but the story was summarised in a Guardian article on 13.12.22, and a more extended account was published by the Blackheath Society - see <https://blackheath.org/books> for a free download of “Road Rage”.