



THE CHELSEA SOCIETY

founded by Reginald Blunt in 1927 to protect and foster the amenities of Chelsea

www.chelseasociety.org.uk

Chairman Damian Greenish

From: Terence Bendixson, Hon. Sec. Planning
39 Elm Park Gardens, London SW10 9QF
Tel & Fax 44 (0)20 7352 3885 t.bendixson@pobox.com

Simon Berkeley BA MA MRTPI
c/o Chris Banks
Programme Officer
Mid Wales (Powys) Conjoined Wind Farm PI
C/O Banks Solutions
21 Glendale Close
Horsham, West Sussex
RH12 4GR.
Tel: 01403 253148 (Direct)
Mob: 07817 322750
Skype: 01273 782194
email: bankssolutionsuk@gmail.com

19 April 2013

RBK&C EIP OF PARTIAL REVIEW OF THE CORE STRATEGY - PUBLIC HOUSES

Background

The Chelsea Society warmly supports the changes in policy being proposed by the Borough Council and it only due to lack of expertise in other matters that it proposes to confine its observations to a few sections of the Schedule of Matters and Issues for Examination - specifically parts of Matter 2.

The Society is the civic society for the part of RBK&C that was the London Metropolitan Borough of Chelsea. The Society is governed by a Council to which its Planning Committee reports. The membership is about 800.

Public houses have concerned the Society for a number of years and this led to an exhibition in 2006 which highlighted the huge number that had been demolished or converted to other uses. Pubs are always controversial - either because neighbouring

residents object to behaviour emanating from them, or because users of them object to changes designed to meet a new market, or because of proposed closure. However they are also significant community assets.

Chelsea

Chelsea is an inner suburb of Central London strung along an ancient Royal road - the King's Road - with a medieval, Thames-side village at its core. In 1700 it consisted of scattered country houses, market gardens and labourer's cottages. By 1900 it was almost completely developed in the forms of streets, squares, dwellings financed by philanthropists, and mansion blocks. The biggest houses lay to the east adjacent to Sloane Street but further west many residents were poor and lived in tiny, two story houses. Public houses were dotted everywhere - many along the King's Road, the Fulham Road and the river but many too in back streets.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Chelsea had a bohemian reputation due to its artistic residents. It was then badly damaged in the war by German bombers aiming at, and missing, Lots Road Power Station, the source of electricity for the Underground. After the war designers such as Mary Quant established the 1960s King's Road as trendy and fashionable. Then, with London's emergence as a global financial centre in the 1980s, it became a popular address amongst bankers, lawyers, accountants and others in business services. This led to the conversion into flats of many community buildings. The College of St Mark & St John (teacher training), Chelsea College of Art, Lots Road Power Station, the Kingsley (secondary) School and a district office and transformer station of the old Central Electricity Generating Board have, to name but a few, all gone to housing.

Finally, and since the 2008 financial collapse, houses and flats have become seen as safe havens for uneasy money in places such as Russia, Greece, Italy and even the Far East. This has led to an explosion in house prices which has led to a surge in applications to convert pubs and restaurants to houses.

Property prices

Foxtons the estate agents, in a circular letter to residents in Elm Park Gardens dated 15th April 2013, claimed that, 'Property prices in South Kensington (based on averages derived from Land Registry Data) have increased by over 52% since January 2009...' Plaza Estates, another agency, in a letter dated April 2013, claimed that they had sold, in Elm Park Gardens, a two-bedroom flat for £1.35m and a three-bedroom one for £2.625m. (These letters will be produced at the Examination.)

Public houses

Public houses, which had been disappearing for decade, began to show signs of a new fashion from the 1980s onwards. In some cases they were converted to restaurants but with facades, minus their acid-etched, window glass, often retained. Back street pubs too moved with the times and began to offer food. This shift to food and drink became particularly noticeable after the turn of the 21st Century when it became more and more

common for pubs to offer, not just drinks, but coffee and tea at all times and good quality food as well.

Examples include The Coopers Arms in Flood Street and The Surprise in Christchurch Terrace. A non-scientific survey of users of the Coopers Arms, carried out in 2012, to assist the Chelsea Society in campaigning for the retention of public houses, is attached as an Appendix. It shows that even in well-to-neighbourhoods such as Chelsea, pubs have a varied social and community role. It shows too that in Chelsea the professional classes are just as keen on pubs as anyone else and it is, of course, their purchasing power that contributes importantly to viability.

From 2008 onwards, with house prices rising as described above, and with a market emerging amongst very rich, foreign buyers, for large, luxury houses, the property industry in Chelsea looked for new lands conquer. One was public houses - the bigger the better.

Matter 2. Issues

(The Chelsea Society will respond to the issues by quoting the relevant paragraph reference and then making an observation.)

2.4a) Public houses are community assets and add character (life and activity as well as appearance) to conservation areas but, with house prices being driven upwards by an international desire to live in Chelsea, coupled with mobile money looking for safe havens, pub buildings and sites are worth far more as houses than as drinking parlours. Changes of use are thus being driven, not by shifts in the behaviour or taste of residents, or reduced viability, but by external financial forces and the hope of very substantial profit. There is no reasonable case for allowing Russian or Arab money to eliminate public houses from the streets of Chelsea.

2.4b) Retaining a valued social and community use and the contribution it makes to the character and appearance of its setting.

2.4c) The Australian and the Ifield Tavern (just in Kensington) have already been converted - the first to a design studio the second to a house. The Britannia Arms in Chelsea Manor Street has been demolished and replaced by houses. Applications to convert the Cross Keys, the Phene Arms and the Queen's Head to houses or flats have already been made, rejected by the Council in 2012, and the rejections upheld by Inspectors at Appeal.

This year an application to convert the upper floors of Le Colombier restaurant in Dovehouse Street, formerly a pub, to flats has been rejected too - after Councillors refused to accept an Officers' recommendation. The Committee room was packed with residents and the Committee Members were swayed, both by the powerful community support for the restaurant (for residents the dining room is as important an asset as a pub) and because of the risk that, deprived of its high quality first floor function room and kitchen space, the business would have lost its viability.

It is the Society's conviction that, without changes in policy designed to protect back street cafes and restaurant, such as Le Colombier, further applications for change of use to housing can be expected. Conversion will be sought for any premises in Chelsea that can be made into a house or flat.

2.5. Public houses are valued meeting places whether they are located in high streets or back streets and so merit saving wherever they are found. Restaurants and cafes, and financial and professional services do not require any special protection in high streets. But, outside Higher Order Town Centres, in other words in back-street locations, they can be regarded as suitable for conversion into houses and therefore, though locally valued, are at risk of being eliminated. This is why they need protection.

A former corner shop, now part of a house, can be seen at the junction of Flood Street and Redesdale Street.

2.6. At the public inquiry into the Phene Arms, the appellant said that the pub was not viable and produced accounts to support this claim. They showed very high income for a pub but very high expenditure too - notably on staff including doormen. Following the loss of the appeal, the pub was sold on 1st April this year for £4m to an experienced pub operator. Such a sale is evidence that a professional pub operator considers the Phene Arms to be commercially viable.

APPENDIX



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THE COOPERS ARMS, 87 FLOOD STREET, SW3 5TB – SURVEY OF PEOPLE IN THE PUB ON 25TH APRIL, 2012 AT 7 PM.

The survey and report were undertaken by Terence Bendixson, Senior Visiting Research Fellow, University of Southampton and Hon. Sec. Planning of the Chelsea Society.

1. Background

The Coopers Arms is a Victorian public house on the corner of Flood and Redesdale Streets in Chelsea. Like the Phene Arms and The Cross Keys, now at risk of being converted into houses, it is located in a back street between the King's Road and the Embankment. The Coopers is owned by Fuller's and serves beer on the ground floor and food upstairs. A half pint of Fuller's' bitter costs £1.80.

On the evening when the survey was undertaken there were 21 people present (3 women) at 7.10 pm with three staff behind the bar. At 7.25 pm the number had risen to 35. Most of the clients were middle class and aged from 35 up to about 60 but two young men (one with a scooter) and two young women – all aged 18 or 19 – came in at about 7.15pm.

2. The interviews

Eleven individuals were interviewed and, once they had been told that applications were pending to convert two pubs in the vicinity into houses, all were told that the purpose of the session was find out why they were in the Coopers Arms and how often they came. It was explained that the purpose was to obtain evidence about pub customers to put before a public inquiry.

3. Conclusions

- Foreign visitors know about England's characterful pubs and like to visit them. (Interview 1.) Pubs in a place like Chelsea, which is a popular tourist destination, accordingly make a contribution to the tourist economy.
- Quieter back streets pubs are valued for what they are – places for comfortable conversation. (Interview 2.)
- Pubs add street-life and vitality to the quiet residential character of Chelsea's side streets. (Interview 3)
- With working partly from home being increasingly common amongst senior professionals, pubs offer a chance for them to work out of the house and avoid isolation. (Interview 4.)
- Different pubs offer different opportunities. Customers may go to one for a drink and another for football. This observation invalidates the view that it is sufficient to have one pub per neighbourhood or within a specified walking distance of a given address. As with other things, so with pubs, people like choice. (Interviews 5 & 6.)
- In Chelsea, residents with high level professional qualifications meet relatives and drink in pubs. Some have been doing so for decades. (Interview 7.)
- Pubs are a rite of passage to adulthood for young people. This is an important social function. (Last interview.)
- In a society where people of different ages often go in different directions, pubs continue to be places where the young meet the old. This too is an important social function. (Last interview.)

4. Detailed report on interviews

a) Interviewee one, who spoke good English with a foreign accent, lives in Chelsea in the World's End Estate and was in the Coopers Arms with his six-year-old daughter. He was drinking; she was having supper. He said: 'It is my first time in this pub. I like it a lot and am glad it is here. Whenever I have visitors from my country, they always want to go to a pub. They want to see this famous part of the English way of life.'

b) Interviewees two and three were attractive women in their thirties. They said that, although they had lived in Chelsea, they now lived in Brighton where they had left their children. 'We are having an evening out and were walking down the King's Road and wanted to find somewhere quiet to have a drink. Sarah saw the sign so we came here. It is a really nice place to be in.'

c) The fourth interviewee was alone with his Apple Mac waiting for a friend. He said he used to live in Chelsea and had had his stag night in The Cross Keys. The Coopers Arms

and the two pubs under threat of vanishing 'were all off the beaten track. You needed to know they are here. They are expensive but still have good beer.'

He went on: 'It is very important for residential areas to have pubs if they are to have life in them. If there are only houses, nothing ever happens in the streets and they are dead.' Furthermore: 'Because so many people in a place like Chelsea now work from home, pubs are more important than ever. They enable people to get out of the house and do their work in a semi-public place. They save people from isolation.'

d) The fifth & sixth interviewees were an Englishman and a woman and he said that, although he now lives in Hong Kong, he is in Chelsea every other month. 'This is an institution,' he said, referring to the Coopers Arms. He went on: 'They cannot close the Phene, we went there yesterday to see the football (Chelsea v. Barcelona): it is a beautiful place.'

e) The seventh interviewee was a lawyer who lives in Redesdale Street. 'Why do I come here? - for the beer. Why else? I have been coming for thirty years.' He was sitting at a table with his brother who had come up to see him from Canterbury. The brother said: 'This place is a social necessity.'

The lawyer added that he was so pleased that The Surprise (another pub in Christchurch Terrace) had reopened and observed that the pubs in Chelsea are mostly full most of the time. 'I love my pub,' he went on. 'Where do you go to meet your friends if there are no pubs?'

f) The final interviewees were four men and women aged 18 and 19. One said, 'A lot of our friends come here. We come a lot. But I don't like the Phene it has been turned into a trendy brothel. (They all laughed.) It is not a pub any longer.' Another of the group added, 'This place has a friendly atmosphere. You can always chat to strangers and the old geezer who is often here is really nice.'

end