

CORNISH BUILDINGS GROUP

THE CHAIRMAN

2009 marks the fortieth anniversary of the Cornish Buildings Group, so it is perhaps appropriate to take stock and examine our past achievements and failures.

I believe that our greatest accomplishment has been the bringing together of a sizeable group of individuals who have the common interest in buildings. Although we try to make our outings convivial social events, they undoubtedly have a serious educational purpose. In this respect we are so lucky to have members who are both articulate speakers and great experts in their several subjects. It is always a pleasure to listen to them, and I for one owe much of my architectural knowledge to these virtuosos.

Over the years our Council members have despatched literally thousands of letters to District Planning Officers. Many, like the biblical sower's seed, have fallen on stony ground, but quite a few appear to have been instrumental in the withdrawal of the more objectionable planning applications. Certain Council members also give of their valuable time to sit on Conservation Area Advisory Committees where their knowledge and argumentative powers undoubtedly have influence. Lest we be considered to be purely negative in our attitude, the Annual Award Scheme allows us to give public praise and encouragement where we consider it to be deserved. Of late, two aspects of the Awards Scheme have become apparent. First, many of the entries given awards in the early days would not stand a chance today; secondly, new building entries are now outnumbering those for restoration projects. Both these are good news and seem to confirm that the standard, particularly of new buildings is improving.

One of my opinions, not necessarily shared by my colleagues is that, on the whole, the future of our larger and more important buildings is now in safe hands. I am a born optimist and I believe that the professional knowledge of both architects and tradesmen has vastly improved over the past twenty years. The use of lime products, the art of respectable pointing, the ability to re-create mouldings of the correct profile and an empathy with old buildings are skills that are much more widely understood today.

Hugo White

GOOD-BYE TO PENWITH, KERRIER, CARADON

Without going into the principle of a unitary authority for local government in our County, the changes will have considerable repercussions in the fields of planning and conservation - our Group's main interests.

Over the years your Council has felt some worthy aim may be progressed with help from the planners but we would receive a couple of encouraging letters, then a rather half-hearted one, while a couple of Districts would not even answer! All rather as if they were different countries!

So we will be looking forward to a more even way of dealing with things and some standardisation over the county. Working architects will welcome this, no longer having to think which new legislation has been taken on board by which Council. 'Does this application need a bat survey does this one need a percolation test . . .'

And the conservation side of planning will be treated as a whole no longer reflect the differing attitudes of the 6 planning departments and their chief officers. The introduction of conservation officers was very haphazard, some districts having a whole team, while others have one who was given so many other tasks they could hardly consider individual applications, even for an important Listed Building.

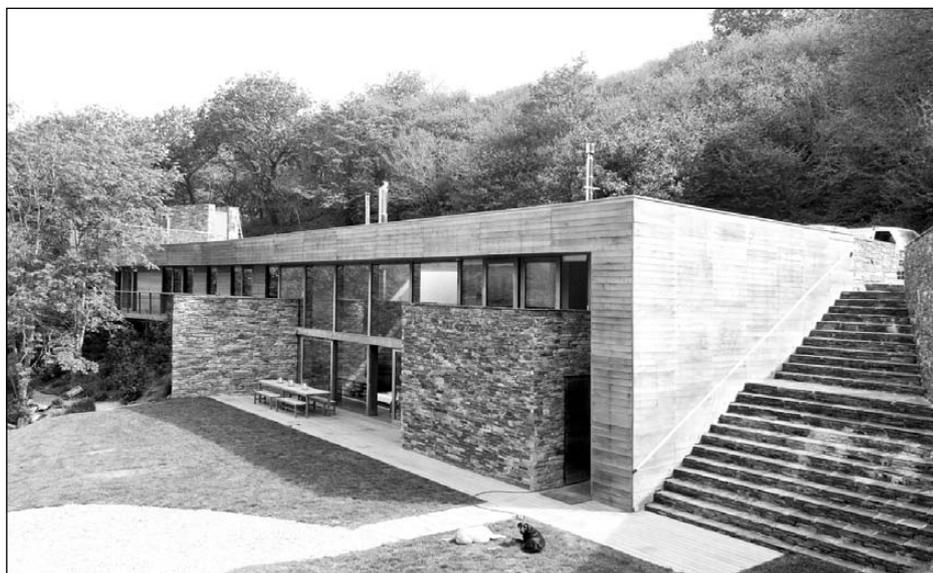
Their advice might then be simply ignored by the planning officer, or over-ruled by the committee.

Some Districts would require extensive details to be submitted for minor interior changes on a fairly unimportant but Listed Building, while in another District major changes to the external appearance might fly through with inadequate drawings and no details, although Listed, at the heart of a World Heritage Site!

The problem was the conservation officer was answerable to a planner, who was her/his 'boss', trained in a different discipline - with varying degrees of sympathy to old buildings.

From the beginning of April, we have a conservation service that covers the county and is led by historic buildings people, with an archaeologist - and a former Council member of the Group - Nick Johnson at the top, while another friend, well known to many of you, Alyson Cooper, heads the conservation officers directly.

With no less than 12000+ Listed Buildings in the county as well as 1800+ scheduled ancient monuments and 145 Conservation Areas, they will be busy, and we look forward to a useful relationship, with the hope that these changes will help to forward the aims of the Group - which in so many ways are in line with the aims of the County's Historic Environment Section



Pencalenick House, Award winner for a new building, see page 2



left: A most worthy Award winner this year: a quite breathtaking large house at Penpillick, on Pont Pill.
left: Looking from the living room and down the creek with Fowey in the distance. The front page photo shows the exterior view, with the two-storey bedroom wing disappearing behind a sheltering screen of retained trees.
right: from the balcony above the living room, with the top-lit curved corridor on the right leading to the upper bedrooms.



ANNUAL AWARDS SCHEME FOR 2008

The Cornish Buildings Group was established to encourage the protection and care of historic buildings and to encourage good architectural practice in the development of new.

With this aim in mind the Annuals Award Scheme was introduced to give public recognition to the best conversion or restoration of an old building and to the best new building.

Cornwall is a unique place and it is to be hoped that any restoration or new build will enhance the built and natural environment in a way that contributes to the viability of the area.

So many restorations have been marred by the dreaded upvc windows, bad pointing and the wrong roof tiles while new housing and public buildings so often take no account of the vernacular but are of the same bland uniformity to be seen anywhere in the country.

The awards scheme hopes to 'educate' and encourage something better than this and the list of previous winners and commendees, from county court to lifeboat house to private dwelling, shows that excellence can be achieved.

It shows also that there are architects, surveyors and builders out there who share this view. In addition the awards provide an opportunity to applaud the talents of all those involved in a scheme.

Thus last year's winner brought comments from the judges as to the excellence of the stone walling undertaken by one individual. Such craftsmen are still needed.

The time table for this year's award has been altered a little and the Awards Ceremony is in June. (see results, page X) following which all the entries go on display throughout Cornwall (usually in libraries) so as many as possible have a chance to see them.



above: The Old Smokehouse, Charlestown
below: Crofters' café at Trelissick



STREET FURNITURE

On urban walks as a child I became fascinated by the wide selection of cast iron lamp posts, bollards and railings that constituted the street furniture of England in the 1930's. I loved the robust texture of the iron and the diversity that they displayed in their detail; even as a small boy, I recognised the pleasing proportions. Later I realised that these objects had almost invariably been cast at local foundries by men who had no formal design education, but relied on their inherent appreciation of beauty. If provincial towns produced street furniture that was pleasing, London was the home of some really splendid examples of the foundryman's art. Being one of the first cities in the world to be lit by gas, London's lamp posts dated back to the reign of William IV, and luckily many examples carry the royal cipher which allows one to date them to a particular reign. Many are of outstanding quality such as the famous 'Dolphin' lamp standards on the Embankment – the last of which, on the South Bank, were cast only a few years ago.

Compare these to the almost invariable ugliness of modern street furniture. Mass produced steel tubing has replaced the old material of cast iron which, by its nature could be moulded into an infinite variety of shapes. Look at any old lamp post and you will see a good solid, heavy base, usually with some

restrained ornament which is integral to the design, supporting a tapering column, which in turn supports a gas lantern. The whole is well proportioned and a pleasure to the eye (doubtless the reason that so many redundant examples now grace the front gardens of suburbia). Compare these to today's lamp posts, made up from a base of steel tube, supporting a longer steel tube of a lesser diameter. These are at least functional, but are often turned into monstrosities by the addition of 'decorative' ornamental rings slapped on without any thought of proportion. Furthermore, they are all too often topped with replica Victorian copper lanterns – why? Our Edwardian ancestors did not put their electric lamps into mock gas lanterns, but designed new fittings appropriate to the new technology.

This article has only dealt with lamp posts, but there is other street furniture that is equally offensive. My own *bêtes noires* are the steel tubes with spider top on which hang baskets of flowers in Summer. Councils love them, and plant them with gay abandon in every urban space. One could go on for ever – the proliferation of needless road signs; plastic bollards; and the grotesque new pattern of pillar boxes recently introduced by Royal Mail. In an age when taste in interior design has improved so markedly over the last few years, why is it that nobody seems capable of producing modern street furniture which pleases the eye?

Hugo White

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

For the last four years a group of 8-10 people have met regularly in Truro City Hall to review the design of proposed developments within the Carrick district.

The need had been recognised to take some action to try to raise the quality of design in the built environment. Carrick District Council [CDC] published the Carrick District Design Guide and elected a councillor as the Design Champion. A Design Review Panel [DRP] was also formed. A representative of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment [CABE] advised the council on the membership of the panel, the terms of reference and guidance on the modus operandi. It was intended that the DRP should review development proposals at an early stage in the planning process before planning permission had been sought.

All types of projects are considered from large scale to individual buildings including landscaping, public and private spaces and access.

The majority of the DRP members are architects. The meetings are chaired by CDC's Design Champion and are facilitated by Carrick's External Design Advisor and the council's Urban Planner. There are two lay members, one of whom is an architect with a practice in Papua New Guinea. The RIBA is represented and the Director of the Architecture Centre of Devon and Cornwall is a panel member and



Peter Lanyon Building at Tremough

All members reading this Newsletter can submit any future projects they think may be worthwhile. As previously, the next submission date will be in the early months of 2010, and all buildings or structures of whatever size completed during the previous two years (ie: 2008/09) will be eligible - in case some real gem has been overlooked! I look forward to hearing from you next year.

Joanne Laing, Awards Administrator



above: inside the housing court on the top levels at Maritime House, Falmouth

above right: The Boathouse at St Mawes, and right, inside, looking through the living areas out to the river.

below: the living area in the top floor flat, and below left an exterior view of the conversion



THE 2008 AWARDS:

Award - Pencalenick House, Pont Pill, Lanteglos-by-Fowey

Special Commendation - The Boathouse, Polvarth Quay, St Mawes

Commendation - The Old Smokehouse, Charlestown

Commendation - Chapel Lodge, Padstow

Commendation - Maritime House, Discovery Quay, Falmouth

Others shortlisted entries were:

'Crafters' Café, Trelissick

Carleon House, Poltesco

Peter Lanyon Building, Tremough Campus

so is a former Principal Landscape Architect for Cornwall County Council. The Cornish Buildings Group, and the Civic Societies of Truro and Falmouth are also represented.

The DRP invites architects and their associates to present their proposals thus giving them the opportunity to 'air' their ideas to a group of people with a wide range of expertise and experience who are neither the client, the designer nor the local authority.

Meetings are planned monthly but are cancelled if proposals are not ready for presentation. CDC supports the meetings with ample tea and coffee, very popular chocolate biscuits and a buffet lunch for an all day meeting if there are at least three schemes to consider.

Much information is received by panel members via the internet prior to the meeting.

Following introductions the Planning Case Officer delivers the planning brief which includes any constraints on the site. e.g. AONB, conservation area, flood risk, etc.

Architects have twenty minutes to 'sell' their scheme to the DRP. Presenters range from a single architect to a team of architects accompanied by the developer, a structural engineer, a planning consultant et al. Presentation involve a variety of strategies. Sometimes panel members receive thick A3 bound books which are talked through.

Power point can be used. Often there are very

large graphics and photos on display boards and occasionally a model is provided. The presentation materials are often left for reference during later discussions.

Perhaps the most useful part of the meeting follows the presentation when DRP members have the opportunity to have a thirty minute question and answer session with the presenters when a very useful dialogue takes place. After this the architects leave and the DRP discusses the proposal and arrives at a consensus as to the content of the draft report. Frequently there is another scheme to consider and the process begins again.

Opportunities to comment on the draft reports are facilitated via the internet. The final report is then delivered to the architects and CDC planning department as soon as possible.

One of the most frequent criticisms from the panel is of poor contextual research resulting in proposed structures that do not fit comfortably in their surroundings. The panel needs more sight lines from every direction to help demonstrate how a new structure could fit into the present context. Proposed extensions to towns with rural surroundings can be too urban. Larger developments sometimes show incoherence between public and private space and semi-private is confusing. Roofing is often a problem in both form and materials. Roof lines are an important characteristic of both Truro and Falmouth because of building variety and

topography. There are many schemes to build apartment blocks with insufficient parking especially in coastal areas. A recent scheme made no provision for parking because there was a nearby road where parking was permitted.

Architects are under pressure from developers to maximise profits but there would be little new building without profit. There are too many schemes which are disappointingly bland, unimaginative and lacking in a convincing style. However although there are few that result in a unanimous enthusiastic response, most have points that if addressed could be greatly improved and only a few to which the response should be that the scheme needs to be rethought, in other words, back to the drawing board!

The effectiveness of the DRP would be enhanced if the panel members were able to make site visits. Time does not allow this and the panel has to rely on members with local knowledge and the information provided by the case officer and presenters.

CDC was the first council to form a panel to review design and although all other district councils have emulated it no other has invited representation from the CBG. It is unclear whether the County's DRPs will continue in their present form under One Cornwall.

Madeleine Pender

ANNUAL AWARDS SCHEME FOR 2009

This year was another successful one for the awards scheme with over fifty entries.

Nine buildings were short-listed for viewing by the judges comprising an interesting mix of restorations and new-builds, from all over Cornwall.

The recipient of the main Slate Award was Fairglen Low Energy Houses in Hayle. The architects are Lilly Lewarne Practice and the developer, Percy Williams & Sons.

Special Commendations were given to Blue Elvin, Newlyn, an interesting contemporary house and to the fine, long awaited, restoration of the Abbey Warehouse, Penzance.

Other entries which impressed the judges and received Commendations were:

Penmead Close, Delabole, a small estate of affordable housing commissioned by Cornwall Rural Housing Association; the new Trelander & St. Clements Community Hall, Truro and the restoration of the early 19th century old Vicarage at Mylor Churchtown.

This year's awards were also notable for the inclusion of several town regeneration schemes. This necessitated the selection of a sub-committee of judges to view them on a separate day.

Helston Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) scheme included several renovated properties and a quirky new cob bus shelter (on the Redruth road if anyone wants to see it). The latter was part of a traditional skills training project involving students from Helston College.

Several more buildings were submitted from Redruth Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS). The judges were very taken with the improvements to the Regal Cinema which retains much of its 1930s art deco architecture and duly awarded it a Special Commendation.

Both these schemes were administered by the former Kerrier District Council

But it was the Penryn THI, under the aegis of Carrick District Council, which was particularly impressive. The meticulous renovations and use of local materials earned the project a Special Commendation for the overall high standard. This happily coincides with the town's 750th anniversary celebrations of the granting of its charter.

It is unusual for the Cornish Buildings Group Awards to consider such schemes but it is surely helpful to draw attention to all the good work that has been undertaken in this field.

Let's hope the economic climate does not preclude any further such projects.

Two other restoration projects were visited on

this day, namely: Hayle Brewery Office which now houses the town's archives and the new bell tower on Coverack Church which was commended for its fine workmanship.

The year culminated in a very enjoyable presentation ceremony at Tregarden, St. Mabyn.

Thanks go to owner Antonia for letting us use her beautiful house.

Thanks also to Terry Knight for assembling such a good display of entries. This is now doing the rounds of Cornwall's libraries. If anyone wants to see it, and I urge them to if possible, please contact me for a rota.

I look forward now to next year!

Joanne Laing,

Awards Administrator

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2008 AWARDS

AWARD

Fairglen, Low-energy housing, Phase I, Hayle
Lilly Lewarne Practice

SPECIAL COMMENDATION

Blue Elvin, house at Newlyn
Nicholas Glover Associates

Penryn Town Heritage Initiative (THI)
Carrick District Council, THI Section

Abbey Warehouse, Penzance THI
Penwith District Council, THI Section

Regal Cinema, Redruth
Kerrier District Council HERS Section

COMMENDATION

Penmead Close, Delabole
Trewin Design Partnership

Trelander & St Clement's Community Hall, Truro
ARCO2 Architecture

The Old Vicarage, Mylor
Harrison Sutton Partnership/RTP Surveyors

Coverack Church Bell Tower
Matthew Robinson

Others shortlisted entries were:

Mount Edgcumbe XXXXX

Bus shelter at XXXXX

Lanyon Barn

Hayle Brewery Office

Helston THI



'PAVERS'

Long, long ago estate roads were built in straight lines, with junctions set at 90°, resulting in neat rectangular plots, for neat(!) rectangular bungalows. Pavements were straight, made of square paving slabs, a narrow strip of grass separating pedestrians from the road with a flowering cherry or similar trees at regular spacing on the 'better' estates. And then the road . . . a mass of black tarmac, quickly laid, easy to work neatly round corners or man-hole covers. A flexible material, ideally suited to surfacing awkward or irregular areas, and comparatively easy to patch after the dig for telephone, electricity, gas or water.

Since then layouts have been radically changed as a result of a two pronged attack from authorities that are so often opposed in their views and objectives!

The planners now like to see all new housing developments as an idealised 18th century 'village' with an 'informal' street layout and variable road widths, taking an arbitrary snake-like route creating endless triangular wedges of left-over and useless ground that nobody wants.

It is more surprising these new layouts have

support from Highways. After so long 'improving' road layouts to ease and speed the flow of traffic it is now all about limiting speeds – particularly in housing areas – and there is nothing better as a traffic calming measure than curvy roads with narrow bits, even if they don't *calm* drivers. Along with them go speed bumps, rumble strips, raised platforms at junctions and a regular change in the surface material – especially if some can be rough enough to enforce lower speeds.

So now we have all sorts of shaped areas of hard surfaces suitable for pedestrians and vehicles, for which a flexible material, easy to lay into every corner, would be ideal . . . like tarmac, maybe?

No – wrong: we have BRICK PAVERS!

Except they are not brick, they are little blocks of coloured concrete

This is considered comparatively cheap, although it is hard to believe that a real clay brick would be that much more in lifetime cost.

They do, of course, look cheap and the standard range of colours look washed out, except after rain. It seems almost as if some accountant worked out that production costs could be reduced if less pigment were used in the concrete mix! Even such a colour as

'charcoal' is little more than pale grey when dry and over the years will become paler since the material and colour are artificial and so fade, unlike a fired brick.

And how do you get 100 x 200mm 'pavers' into the flowing shapes of housing estate roads, and around manholes well, the answer is for you to see, all around you!

For the last 30 years private estate roads as well as almost every pedestrianised shopping street from Causwayhead, Penzance to the north of Scotland has the same brick pavers. The only trouble is that they are now looking so bad after a quarter of a century – although often having replaced century old brick or stone – that they are the first thing every town does to kick off its regeneration programme!

Using granite! Often imported from far away.

The only problem is most private housing development budgets could not stretch to the quality of materials used under a THI or HERS scheme for a pedestrianised shopping area!

So they end up with pavers as the only 'cheap' material which a highways authority will accept for 'adoption'. Except we should ask if the council will replace them when they look tired and faded - or maybe they will have moved on and accept tarmac as a more suitable solution?

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN AN 'OFF' DAY

Leaning on some railings waiting for my wife - as we men often do - and letting my eyes take in the surroundings, I was struck by just how ghastly some mid-twentieth century buildings are.

We were in Bude town centre, not a place of immense beauty but, even so, many of the buildings have at least some sort of rough cohesion. Yes, they've been wantonly vandalised with unsuitable windows, their shop-fronts and fascias replaced by stark plastics and sheet



Many of the buildings have at least some sort of rough cohesion [Queen Street, Bude]

glass devoid of imagination or ornament, and yes, their content can be the sort of tat that a certain type of trader sees as befitting a less-than-prosperous Cornish seaside town. Nevertheless the scale and form of most buildings has a degree of uniformity which is, putting it at its lowest, inoffensive.

Then there is this.



The present building could only have been created by someone with no self-esteem and no care for Bude [Boots store, Belle Vue, Bude]

The street, incidentally, is named Belle Vue - 'beautiful view'...

It is quite hard to conceive of anyone who could think this building was appropriate, or indeed worth constructing anywhere. Did the

person who designed it have a grudge against Bude? Did he perhaps have a childhood in which pencils and paint brushes were banned as the tools of Satan? Did his art teacher ruthlessly belittled every effort he made to draw and made him the butt of sarcasm and unkind humour?

Could any previous age have so wasted the opportunity of a corner site to build something of note? Think of how a Victorian or Edwardian shopkeeper might have erected an imposing edifice to improve his town's status (and his own at the same time, of course). The present building could only have been created by someone with no self-esteem and no care for Bude.

My suspicion? A Geordie shipyard welder was doodling at crib time on the back of his fag packet a design for the pigeon loft he planned to build in his back yard at the weekend. A prankster friend later salvaged the discarded empty packet from the bin, copied the sketches, up-scaled them, and passed them on to a gullible developer, who took the 'plans' to the planning office. They were duly



An imposing edifice to improve his town's standing [Commercial Street, Camborne]

passed because "Bude needs an exciting new store" - yes, like a Luftwaffe raid it did - and a blot on the townscape was given the go-ahead. Well, that may be fanciful, but it is surely more credible than the truth.

Unfortunately every town in Cornwall, and many a village too, has buildings designed by

the same dead hand. Cornwall's relative poverty has not only prompted local business-folk to erect the cheapest structures possible, preferably without any costly architectural input, but also to incoming opportunists to do likewise in the justifiable belief that no one in authority would protest or prevent them doing so.

For much of the twentieth century thoughtful intelligent architecture in Cornwall was viewed as irrelevant and unnecessary. In most local schools, the notion of encouraging any appreciation of good building design would have been as relevant as teaching the rules of rugby in Sanskrit text. Public interest in conservation was almost non-existent before the last quarter of the century, forged belatedly by the demolition of a gradually accumulating body of well-



The truly monstrous Tesco emporium [Iceland store -formerly Tesco's-, Fore Street, Redruth]

loved buildings, such as the Red Lion in Truro, making way for the determinedly ugly Lipton's, later Co-op store; or Tabb's Hotel in Redruth to make way for the truly monstrous Tesco emporium (now Iceland); the destruction of the Camborne School of Mines (Tesco again), and later the Holman Brothers foundry buildings, Camborne's soul and identity (Tesco's second attack); not to mention the laying to waste of the much of the centre of St Austell, a devastation from which that poor town can never truly recover.

Those of us in the third and fourth quarters of life have lived with these excrescences, growing so used to them that we don't see them any more. Just how sad is that? We can but hope that our children invest as heavily in demolition equipment as our generation did, and that they are angry enough to direct it at the buildings we bequeathed them rather than those our forefathers did.



One of the more interesting entries from the last Awards, was a bus shelter constructed of stone, timber, slate and cob, by our friend and member Matthew Robinson. An excellent one-off, and slightly eccentric answer to the design of a small shelter - that is patently to be preferred to the usual local authority answer! The pastiche cast-aluminium bus shelter can be chosen from a catalogue, in Victorian or Edwardian style, and somehow is therefore considered appropriate for use in a Cornish Conservation Area(!), despite the crude and ill-informed detailing. As part of street improvements schemes, prepared by road engineers, we suspect these rarely even come before the expert critical gaze of a planning officer.

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