

THE BATTLE FOR BROMLEY'S HERITAGE

The story of how the Town Centre Conservation Area was achieved as remembered by Tony Banfield

The post war period signified by the 1951 Festival of Britain saw a determination towards building a better future and the new planning laws elevated the role of the Town Planner. The result was devastation of historic Town Centres for what was, at the time, perceived to be 'progress'. For instance and hard to credit now large swathes of historic Bath (now a World heritage Site) went under the bulldozer in the 1960's before the conservationists stepped in. Bromley Planners were no different and, in 1964 gave us, in place of the Georgian White Hart Coaching Inn, the concrete lump now occupied by Top Shop etc and the equally brutal Mall Shopping Centre in 1970 in place of beautiful Georgian Bromley Lodge. The 1970's and 80's saw the systematic destruction of the High Street from Market Square to the Library with the loss of many more historic and loved buildings including Hennekeys Wine Lodge and the Library itself designed by the notable local architect Evelyn Hellicar.

Local authorities like Bromley had had powers to designate Conservation Areas since 1957 and from 1967 had the power to prevent demolition of buildings within these conservation areas. Despite the obvious case for our historic Town Centre being protected in this way Bromley Council did nothing to stem piecemeal demolition of historic buildings. However, the Council's 1982 draft Borough Plan, on face value, appeared to show a change of heart. The Plan had identified what was called an "Area of Special Townscape Value" using all the jargon of Conservation Area legislation. On further examination, however, it was found to be meaningless. Without an actual Conservation Area designation this meant that still the only buildings in the town protected from demolition were the statutorily listed Bell group, The Parish Church, Old Town Hall, Bromley College and Bromley Palace and the rest was still up for both piecemeal and comprehensive redevelopment. Piecemeal demolitions not only continued apace but the Plan itself proposed demolition of the entire south side of Tweedy Road for road widening, destruction of the north and west sides of the Palace Park to construct Kentish Way and subsequently the Civic Centre Car park. As well as this were the loss of areas of housing and the Methodist Church to construct what was to become the Glades/Intu shopping centre then referred to as the Elmwood Centre (a modest affair compared to the giant monolith that materialised).

Residents affected by the Glades development formed the Heart of Bromley Residents Association (HOBRA). There was stirring letter in the Kentish Times from the new, Secretary, Jo Lansdel, rallying support and I remember responding with my own letter talking about the 'Rape' of the Town by development. I was immediately recruited as conservation officer and impressed by the determination of the Association headed by Jonathan Clay, at that time a science teacher but now a respected planning lawyer as a direct result of his time with HOBRA.

I took on a conservation role and at the 1984 Borough Plan Inquiry it fell to me to challenge the Council's failure to protect the historic town centre from piecemeal development and their proposals to demolish large areas of it. On behalf of HOBRA I had prepared a large document which I now know was the first attempt by anyone to fully appraise the historic character and appearance of the Old Town. It was dramatically entitled "Old Bromley - Conservation or Annihilation"! I remember nervously reading the entire document at the Inquiry in the packed Great Hall at the Civic Centre. The first line read *"This report is prepared in angry response to Bromley Council's failure to appreciate the special features of old Bromley and their consequent failure to protect those features as part of the heritage of our beautiful town"*. The document contained 75 photos with a comprehensive analysis of the character and appearance of an area covering more or less what is now designated. It was a laborious task in those days when cut and paste meant exactly that!

Needless to say our proposals were rejected outright by the Council's Chief Architect /Planner at the Inquiry on the basis that it was not the Council's intention to preserve buildings in the Town Centre but only to ensure new development was of restricted height and in suitable materials. When the Borough Plan Inspector published his report some months later he rejected the Chief Planner's response calling it 'weak' and recommended HOBRA pursue the matter for a Conservation Area designation as a separate initiative.

However, by this time we had already sought expert advice from elsewhere since it was not forthcoming from the Council. Our document was sent to The Victorian Society, The Georgian Group, and SAVE Britain's Heritage all of whom gave full support and wrote to the Chief Planner calling for him to make a designation. Some of their comments are worth relating here.

When I showed the architectural advisor from the Victorian Society around the Town she was horrified at the developments from Mothercare down to the Library. *"Your council must really hate this town to allow this to happen"*, was her comment. Her recommendation to the Council was fully supportive of our case for a conservation area.

Similarly, when the Deputy Secretary of the Royal Fine Art Commission came and had a look around, he too, was horrified at the new development and said that part of the High Street was the *"worst piece of new townscape he had seen in any town in the entire country"*.

Roger White, the outspoken Secretary of the Georgian Group, commented in his letter to the Chief Planner 30th August 1984 *"As the author of definitive Country Life articles on the history of Bromley College, I am very familiar with the centre of Bromley and with its multifarious attractions. It seems to me that these attractions, though clearly understood by local residents, are sadly underestimated by the councillors of the Borough. At the same time it could hardly be claimed that any of the recent contributions to the townscape have been in any way distinguished; they are, on the contrary characterised in varying degrees by banality and vulgarity."*

Sophie Andre for Save Britain's Heritage also wrote in full support of our case.

All this co-incided with the Mothercare development which proposed demolition of an early 18th c house/shop in the High Street described in Horsburgh's History of Bromley as that of William Baxter in the 19th c. The Council gave permission for the replacement building that we see today. We took them to task in the press for failing to protect the historic building. The response from the Chair of the Planning Committee was they would have liked to save it but could not because it was not listed. Our response the following week was that had they designated a conservation area they would have been quite able to prevent demolition.

William Baxter's old shop proved to be the catalyst for action. In some ways quite fitting because he was great champion of local history and his writings in the late 19th early 20th century reveal so much of the life of Bromley in past times and forms a major part of ELS Horsburgh's definitive History of Bromley.

We had good advice from a number of sources and learned that the Greater London Council (GLC) also had powers to make conservation areas and so contacted the Historic Buildings Division citing the demolition of Baxter's shop as the need for urgent action. Chief Officer, Dr Phillip Whitbourne and his team of Dr Paul Calvocoressi and Dr Chris Sumner did a swift and thorough survey and reported to the Historic Buildings Panel that there was a clear case for a designation. The Panel, co-incidentally lead by our own Chislehurst Councillor, Joan Wykes, not only made this plain to Bromley but also said that if the Council were still unwilling to designate a Conservation Area the GLC HB Panel would use its own powers to do so.

Bromley's Chief Planner duly advised Bromley's Development Control Committee of the inevitability of a designation and recommended Bromley make their own small designation in the hope this would satisfy the GLC Historic Buildings Panel and avert a designation which could affect Council proposed development. A document converting the Brough Plan "Area of Special Townscape Value" into a CA proposal was submitted to development Control Committee in February 1985 and accepted. This covered just Market Square and the Upper High Street. Roger White from the Georgian Group, always ready for a sharp quip, commented *"My principle reservation is that for some inexplicable reason the boundary.... falls just short of Bromley Collegethe only building in the centre of town which is Listed Grade I. I would have thought the case for its inclusion was self-evident."*

There were similar comments from others about the exclusion of the Locally Listed Council owned Parish School. Of course, unbeknown to any of us at the time the Council had already earmarked this historic building for possible demolition for relocation of the Methodist Church in order to build the Glades for which the Council was and is co-developer.

The GLC HBD and Panel were still unimpressed and further negotiation took place. Bromley duly added the College, Parish School and Church Road to their designation.

Meanwhile the now infamous Ski Slope proposal on Martins Hill was proposed by the recreation Committee on behalf of a private developer resulting in sackfuls of public objections so we requested the Hill to be included along with the Palace Grounds and Queens Garden in any GLC designation. Also at this time, Sainsbury's put in an outline application to build on Walters Yard which would demolish the quaint but hidden stabling quarter from the old Bell Coaching Inn and various other stables, houses in College Slip and the Astor Cinema, the oldest known working cinema auditorium in Kent. We asked the GLC HB officers to look at these areas, too. On seeing the quaint old stables and cobbled courtyards Dr Whitbourne commented that this could be Bromley's Covent Garden area likening it to Neal's Yard.

Conservation should be a non political matter but it isn't. Designations are made by politicians on expert recommendations. Given that Bromley Council had committed funds to see the GLC abolished and had already taken the GLC to court overturning the 'Fares Fair' policy which briefly kept bus and tube fares down the GLC conservation Area designation proposal became a political football between the two authorities.

The GLC HB Panel was made up of cross party politicians but on the day they were to decide on their own conservation area designation from the Town Centre it was announced by the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, that the GLC would be 'abolished' in April 1986. All the ruling party members were consequently called to an emergency meeting and the remaining ones decided to designate only small additions particularly Walters Yard which was under direct threat from Sainsbury's. Following the Panel's interim decision there were still areas missing so we kept up the pressure and the matter was eventually referred to the full planning committee.

Before a decision and in typical GLC style of the times the Chair of Planning, George Jones, organised an open-top bus visit with press and TV cameras prior to his meeting with the Leader of the Council, Dennis Barkway and Chief Officers for which we provided a comprehensive photographic exhibition. HOBRA Members went along on the bus trip dressed in Victorian costumes borrowed from Bromley Arts Council and we made a day of it. It was all very jolly and I recall the runaway bus hurtling around the streets of the town many of which had never seen a bus including Glassmill Lane where the Chair of Planning would have been de-capitated by a low branch had we not all yelled 'DUCK'. I even appeared on the BBC six o'clock news in top hat and frock coat as we parked outside no 8 South Street where HG Wells went to school and which had been omitted from the Bromley designation. Needless to say the more sedate HBD and Panel Members declined to join in this pre-meeting jamboree.

The meeting with the Bromley Councillors later that day proved fruitless and so in September 1985 the matter went to the full GLC planning Committee and we got the full Conservation Area designation we wanted.

However, as the date of GLC abolition grew near we discovered that the necessary public notices had not been done due to the chaos caused by the impending GLC abolition and the need to help literally thousands of GLC employees to find alternative work. The matter was discovered in the run up to a Planning Appeal in March 1986 into demolition and redevelopment of one side of West Street by local developer, Steventons. While the Council had refused permission, hence the appeal, the appellant was questioning whether or not the area was a legally designated conservation area as the necessary public notices had not been lodged and without which the designation would lapse and the buildings left unprotected. I recall standing over the committee clerk in a deserted County Hall while the necessary documents were copied for me to deliver to Bromley's Land Registry and the London Gazette. I felt like Neville Chamberlain rushing into the West Street Inquiry waving the papers declaring 'it is a conservation area' whereupon the Inspector agreed and he subsequently dismissed the West Street appeal.

But a new threat emerged when the new Chair of Bromley's Development Control Committee, Tony Wilkinson, who was also Town Centre Ward Councillor told the DC committee that when the GLC was abolished the Council would simply cancel the GLC designation and go back to its own original small designation, which, despite all the expert evidence to the contrary he said he believed was the only correct assessment of what was worthy of conservation in the town. However the Thatcher government

announced the GLC Historic Buildings Division, because of its London based historic buildings expertise would not be abolished but would be transferred to English Heritage as its London Division. We immediately informed the Head of the Division, Ashley Barker, of Bromley's intention to cancel the GLC conservation area.

We had several meetings with Mr Barker, who let it be known that cancellation of its inherited GLC designation by Bromley would be both unlawful and also jeopardise all conservation area in the country. If upheld in law Bromley's proposed action, as a precedent, would create what was described as a 'ping-pong' effect where one political regime could de-designate a previous regime's designation putting all recognised historic environments at risk. He informed Bromley Council that if they de-designated anything English Heritage would re-designate.

Ashley Barker advised us that although EH could re-designate it had no further powers of direction in dealing with planning applications etc. so the best option was for EH to try to convince Bromley to adopt all of the area that had not been identified for specific Borough Plan developments which by then were adopted policy in the Borough Plan. These were the demolition of all of the houses on the south side of Tweedy Road, the destruction of a large part of the historic Palace Park to build Kentish Way and the demolition of houses and the Methodist Church to build the 'Elmwood Centre' (The Glades / Intu).

There followed a site visit where Jonathan Clay and I conducted a large contingent from the EH London Advisory Committee around the Town. The Committee was Chaired by Ted Hollumby, founding father of the William Morris Society and resident of Morris's Red House in Bexley. Jennifer Freeman was representing the Victorian Society and Bridget Cherry, editor of Pevsner's Guides was also present among many other starry names in the world of historic buildings expertise. They came in a fleet of Lomousines but decided to tour on foot in the rain for several hours. We ended up in the Bromley Arts Council's doomed Holwood Road premises for coffee. Following the Committee's recommendations Bromley recanted and finally enlarged their own small designation adopting the major part of the original GLC designation as its own in 1987.

A temporary change of political emphasis in Bromley in the 1990s when then Lib Dems held the balance of power resulted in quite a change of heart and for a while the Council became quite pro-conservation, designating a number of new areas in the Borough. These included further additions in the Town Centre CA in 1991, 1996 and 2002 all in consultation with English Heritage. Heritage street lamps even began to appear all of which are now being removed as part of the Bromley North, so called, "improvements".

Looking back these were decisive and exciting times and it is unlikely that any conservation area designation in the country has been subject to so much controversy and expert scrutiny before and after its designation.

The threats to the historic environment of the Town Centre continue not least directly in the Council's Town Centre Area Action Plan. If the above story has any message it is that it is up to local people to continue fight for and demand conservation of their historic environment.

Tony Banfield - October 2014