

Sutton House Society

Newsletter

March 2002

For all interested in the past, present and future of Sutton House, Hackney

Annual Report of the Sutton House Society

Presented at the Annual General Meeting of the Sutton House Society 22nd November 2001



During the past year and not for the first time in its history the Sutton House Society (originally the Save Sutton House Campaign) has found itself at odds with the National Trust. A new policy for the management of the house and in particular the range of activities within it was proposed in February 2001 which broadly speaking met with the disapproval of our members.

At times like this I think it is important to remember where we have come from. Were it not, in 1936, for the determination of an architect Percy Lovell, secretary of the London Society and of the London Survey Committee, to seek to purchase the house for the National Trust, it might not be still standing today ! However after the initial pleasure of the acquisition shared by Labour leader George Lansbury then vice-chairman of the Trust, it soon became to be regarded as more of a liability than an asset. A post-war Secretary of the Trust after visiting the house for the first time wrote 'The house is not, I think, one that we should be proud of and I cannot imagine why we ever bought it.' The burden of maintaining the house with its motley collection of organisations occupying various parts

of it was clearly considered a nuisance. By 1982 however the last tenants, the trade union ASTMS, moved out and the Trust was faced with a new problem of what to do with it. No suitable new tenants could be found and within a short time squatters had occupied the house. Somewhat in desperation the Trust decided that the best policy was to sell a lease on the property and allow it to be converted into private flats for sale, a plan which would have involved the demolition of the Wenlock Barn and other Edwardian additions. It was at this stage that several local people, objecting to this sad fate for one of the most important parts of Hackney's building heritage, formed the 'Save Sutton House Campaign'.

A meeting with Dame Jennifer Jenkins and Angus Stirling (then Chairman and Director General of the National Trust) and Mike Gray (Chair of the Campaign), in the derelict house, proved to be a turning point. Dame Jennifer herself chaired a meeting which agreed that an alternative should be sought which would ensure the preservation of the house for all to share. A steering committee was formed under the chairmanship of Isobel Watson, a

Hackney historian, which met in the offices of the CPRE in Victoria. A member of that committee was Fiona Reynolds, Director of the CPRE and now the Director General of the National Trust. In a recent interview, in the *Telegraph Magazine*, she said that 'she was involved as a volunteer in developing the Trust's Tudor mansion, Sutton House, in east London. It was a real eye opener. It showed how partnership with the inner-city communities in Hackney could teach the Trust what it could do to offer quality of life and and real meaning to the community.'

These meetings resulted in the creation of what was known as the 'Community Scheme'. The Sutton House Society, as it had become, paid for an architectural feasibility study by Julian Harrap Architects (with Richard Griffiths the principal architect) and a business plan from Prometheus Consultants. These became the blueprint for the 'Community Scheme' that sought to restore the house with the highest standard of workmanship and to open the house to all with a wide range of educational and social activities. The SHS had established the viability of the scheme and it was approved at all levels of the National Trust. By 1989 work commenced on the restoration of the house and it was fully open by 1992 — the project being managed by Carole Mills appointed by the Trust.

However in February 2001 a draft proposal was put forward by the Trust that would reduce the range of activities within the house, particularly social activities like wedding receptions and parties. The Society felt that these activities encouraged a wide range of people of all ethnic backgrounds to enjoy the experience of an historic house. A period of three weeks was all that was allowed for discussion of the draft. However the Society successfully pleaded for an extension of that period by three months.

Members of the Society, in written and telephoned responses, overwhelmingly opposed most of the changes in particular the changes to the Café Bar operation. As a result of our campaign on the issue it was agreed by the Trust to pursue the option of seeking a private concessionaire to take over the Café Bar and continue the policy of cooked meals and existing opening times — that is to say 11.30 am to 5.00 pm, Wednesday to Sunday. We are pleased to say that a suitable concessionaire has been appointed (Enola Café and Catering Co.) but regret that the existing staff will be made redundant.

Sutton House Society Events and Activities 2001

During the year the Society organised a number of events including two parties in the gardens of Mike Gray and Carole Mills at Clapton and Tunbridge Wells, a visit to Ightham Mote where former SH staff member Ros Daniels gave us a most pleasurable guided tour, a visit to the Süleymaniye Mosque in Kingsland Road, and one to the Agapemonite Church in Upper Clapton.

The Sutton House Society Annual Lecture was given by author and journalist Michael Leapman on the 18th-century Hoxton nurseryman Thomas Fairchild.

Four newsletters were produced during the year and in addition all members were circulated, in February, with the discussion document on the future management of Sutton House.

At the AGM the following resolutions were adopted:

1. The Society reaffirms its role as a friends' organisation supporting the National Trust at Sutton House.
2. The Society reaffirms its participation in the Local Advisory Committee, to which it nominates 50% of the members, and seeks to see that Committee taking a more active and valued role.
3. The committee of the Sutton House Society will seek to co-opt a senior member of Sutton House staff to improve communication between the Society and the National Trust.
4. The Society will participate both collectively and individually in the forthcoming consultation process as outlined by the Property Manager in the November edition of the Newsletter.
5. The Society will continue to have a fundraising role in support of Sutton House and early discussions will be sought with the National Trust to establish a worthwhile project for our accumulated funds.
6. The Society will actively seek to increase its membership, for example, by recruiting from the Sutton House team of volunteers who are not already members of the Society.
7. The Society will aim to extend its programme of social events and activities for members both within Sutton House and outside.
8. The Society will aim to improve the quality and frequency of its newsletter providing up-to-date information on events in Sutton House and featuring articles on the history of Sutton House and its environs.

St. Lawrence and the Gridiron

In 1993 a Tudor stone fireplace was discovered, in Sutton House, behind a later one, in what we now call the Georgian Parlour. It was a little damaged but essentially intact and finely carved in the spandrels with a pattern of vine leaves. The rather grand nature of the fireplace suggested that the room was probably of a higher status than the buttery that had been previously supposed. The suggestion was that it might have been the steward's parlour. The steward in Ralph Sadleir's time was Gervaise Cawood. We know this because an account book of Sadleir's estate dating 1541, drawn up by Cawood, is preserved in the British Library.

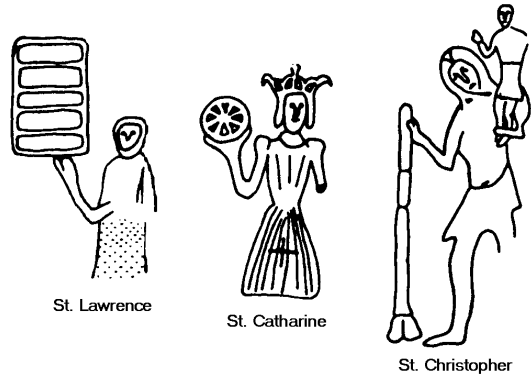
Curiously the stonework at the top of the fireplace was inscribed with several examples of graffiti including letters like SS thought to represent Sanctus Spiritus (the Holy Ghost).

Alan Hayday, a member of the Sutton House Society, has come up with an interesting suggestion concerning the significance of an engraved figure of what appears to be a man dressed in Tudor costume with a ruff and skull-cap. He is holding upwards in front of him something that Alan describes as looking like a giant fly swatter! However he suggests that the truth is far more interesting.



Through his interest in the Knights Templar, the order of crusaders that held land in Hackney in the 13th century, Alan visited the famous cave at Royston, Hertfordshire, said to be a secret Templar oratory and meeting place after the suppression, in 1312, by Pope Clement V, of the order. It was sealed up around 1350 and not rediscovered until 1742. In the chalk cave, beneath Melbourn Street near the ancient Royston Cross, were found dozens if not hundreds of carved figures engraved into the soft chalk. Among these are four saints who are known to have been revered by the Templars: St. Christopher, St. George, St. Catharine (martyred on a wheel, hence Catharine-wheel fireworks) and St. Lawrence.

St. Lawrence is shown characteristically holding a gridiron, essentially a piece of cooking equipment for roasting pieces of meat but in his case used to torture him to death. This figure is very similar though on a larger scale to the graffito in Sutton House and the 'fly swatter' is indeed a gridiron and Alan believes that the figure represents in fact St. Lawrence. Alan says, 'Interestingly Saint Lawrence was patron saint of cooks (for obvious reasons) as well as of Rome and curiously Sri Lanka.' His feast day is 10th August.



There is not room here to detail the circumstances which led to Lawrence's martyrdom by the Emperor Decius in 258, but after a series of tortures because he refused to make sacrifices to the Roman gods he was said to have been roasted to death on a gridiron. As he was dying he is said to have taunted Decius with the cry 'One side has been roasted. Turn me over and eat it!'

Alan suggests that Cawood himself may have been responsible for the graffito and the significance of the symbol of the patron saint of cooks so near to the kitchen should not be overlooked. Certainly Cawood considered himself a bit of an artist. On the front page of his account book is a drawing of a crow perched on a tree. This is in fact his *rebus*, a pictorial pun on his name. Think about it!



NEWS FROM SUTTON HOUSE

More Changes at Sutton House!

After four years as Property Manager Teresa has decided to make a life change and is moving to Ireland. She writes 'No doubt I shall have enormous withdrawal symptoms both for London and the great team of staff and volunteers at Sutton House... [but] it will be the right time for someone with fresh energy and ideas to take over and shape the new direction for Sutton House.' Interviews have been held for her successor and we anticipate an appointment in the near future.

Nicola Richardson, administrative assistant, is also moving on to become Visitor Services Manager at Kenwood House, Hampstead. The Society congratulates her on her appointment and looks forward to a special guided tour of the house later in the year.

Glen Sillett and Justin Derrick bade farewell to Sutton House with a fancy-dress party on 23rd February. Between them they have worked for the National Trust at Sutton House, running the Café Bar and other duties, for around 18 years and will be much missed as will Chris Woodley who is also leaving after 8 years service as a general assistant.

The Sutton House Society wishes all those departing to 'pastures new' the very best in their future lives and careers.

A new round of consultation

A further consultation process is currently under way which will lead to a management plan for Sutton House for the next three years. Hackney consultants Renaisi are steering this process and will shortly be producing a report. The outcome of this will be reported on in the next newsletter.

Environment Issues

Sutton House Society members are involved in a number of new initiatives. In preparation are two Heritage Lottery Fund applications for improvements to the Hackney Churchyard and to the historic tower of St. Augustine within the churchyard. A much-needed scheme to revamp the churchyard bordering on Sutton House depends on a £1.5 million bid for funding. Groundwork Hackney are spearheading the application and already have won £350,000 in government regeneration money towards the restoration project, plans of which were on show at Sutton House at the end of February. The Rector, Rev. John Pridmore, writes, 'The churchyard is a wonderful asset. It is an oasis in the heart of Hackney, but it has deteriorated over the years and we want to put that right.'

Most of the churchyard was, in the 16th century, part of the estate of Sutton House and still remains an important part of our immediate environment. A friends group is to be set up

supporting the project and the next meeting is planned for 19th March. For further details contact John Houston on 020 8985 0969.

St. Augustine's Tower is the oldest surviving built structure in Hackney. It has been partly restored by Hackney Historic Buildings Trust but if the application of around £100,000 for lottery funding is successful further work will be carried out. Health and safety regulations need to be addressed and full interpretation facilities incorporated. Once completed the tower will be open to the public on a regular basis.

Sutton House Society Activities 2002

The Society is planning a wide variety of events and activities for the year and these will include:

- A visit to Knole House (NT) and a picnic in the deer park. We hope to include a visit to Lullingstone Roman Villa on the same day followed by tea with Carole Mills in Tunbridge Wells.
- A day's outing to Hampstead where Nicola Richardson will give a special guided tour of Kenwood House (EH) and we also plan to visit Fenton House (NT) and possibly Willow Road (NT).
- A visit to Mortimer Wheeler House in Hoxton which is an extension of the Museum of London. Artefacts from the dig at Sutton House in 1990 are stored there and we hope will be available to view.
- A visit to St. Leonard's Shoreditch where Richard Griffiths, the architect who restored Sutton House, has been undertaking conservation and new building work.
- A midsummer social at Sutton House.

Full information will be given in the next newsletter.

The Society is looking for volunteer drivers to drive the Hackney Community Transport minibus. We would like to hear from any members willing to undertake a short test to enable them to be registered as an official driver.

Sutton House on the Internet

Check out <http://welcome.to/SuttonHouse> for information about Sutton House, Sutton House Society and Sutton House Music Society. This information is kept up to date by Peter Mudge who is also very keen to send any Society members the newsletter and any other information by e-mail. If you wish to receive future information in this way, please contact Peter Mudge at: peter@mudge.screaming.net. (Those members who have already registered their willingness to receive information in this way need not do so again.)

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