

# 40th Anniversary

## Memories of SHRA's Foundation in 1965



### June Turner The first lady of SHRA

When rumour began to circulate that plans for an inner orbital road threatened the village, June Turner was among the early militants.

June was also the only woman on the anti-road committee - the precursor of SHRA. "Planning blight suddenly stopped people selling their houses. There was real anger. There was also a much stronger community spirit then, so people came together very easily.

"In other respects, apart from the in-filling, Strawberry Hill was much the same as now," recalls June. "But there were many more young mothers at home, meeting at the shops or walking their babies in Radnor Gardens.

"Suddenly, all that was threatened by a four-lane highway to be bulldozed through people's homes"

Energised by the threat, the action committee's leaflets and posters drew hundreds of residents to St James's Hall; so many, in fact, that not all got in.

The meeting was unanimous in agreeing to brief counsel to fight the road. "The barrister's fee was £400 for two days attendance at the Public Inquiry in York House.

"It was a lot of money, but richer residents dug in their pockets. Everyone contributed and eventually we recouped the lot."

The Public Inquiry was a dramatic moment. Feelings were running high.

"I spoke to oppose the project," says June.

"The occasion was rather formal. In fact, we were all very formal in those days. I wore a suit - we all did - and a big red hat" Brought together by the road threat, and having tasted victory in defeating it, the committee members realised they must be vigilant and, if necessary, be prepared to go to law again.

"The present constitution of SHRA is based on keeping aware of planning and other threats to the neighbourhood. To this day, the committee's reserve is described as a fighting fund, I believe."

Soon, residents realised they could fight for other causes and so began the 40 year story of SHRA.

"We met in people's houses at first and then moved to St James's Hall regularly. Meetings were very well attended. There seemed to be many more young mothers involved. Now times are different."

June's early involvement ended in 1966 when she and husband Willie, who was in the Diplomatic Service, were posted to Africa. But on their return 20 years later, the Turners were plunged into SHRA affairs once more.

Willie Turner became Chairman of SHRA and counts among one of the successes of his period in office the extension of the opening hours of the station booking office - which remain today.

"It was only open for a few hours a day at one stage. Now it is open at weekends as well."

Local transport was always a big issues, recalls Willie.

Ironically, in the last six months train frequency has been effectively cut to one train every 30 minutes. Another battle which SHRA has taken on.

### George Kerpner Tea in the big house

George Kerpner, Austrian by birth, Strawberry Hillian by choice, was one of the founders, and then leaders, of SHRA. He was one of the original group of members to challenge the road scheme and was the first elected Hon. Secretary. But George's route to SHRA was rather different from most. He arrived in Strawberry Hill as a boy of 13 with his family, escaping dramatic pre-war events in Austria.



The family discovered a peaceful riverside community, almost unchanged on the surface from the Strawberry Hill of today.

"Of course, there were no aeroplanes, almost no cars and the centre of social life was the tennis club - alas, now gone. But it still has much the same feel."

Socially, however, Strawberry Hill 70 years ago was very different.

"The big houses in Waldegrave Park were staffed by butlers and servants. Not far away, just off Shacklegate Lane, were roads of railway houses which were really slums. Children ran barefoot and women sat on their doorsteps watching the world go by. Of course, there was no contact between them and us. It was a tremendous contrast".

One of George's first experiences was to meet a kind elderly lady in one of the big houses. He was invited to tea. "We were served by parlour maids. It was an utterly delightful occasion and I was very impressed."

Fast forward to 1965 and George was now married to Margaret and living in Orford Gardens. The threatened road scheme galvanized the community, recalls George.

"One of the prime mover was a man who worked in Whitehall - he lived in Pope's Grove - and knew how to fight the plan. Some say he worked for MI5, this lent a certain air of mystery.

We also had the use of his office for photocopying and such like. You could say we had government support!"

After the road fight was won, George remained Honorary Secretary until 1975.

# Historian of Strawberry Hill

Anthony Beckles Willson is known to thousands of readers of his books as the historian of Strawberry Hill and Alexander Pope.

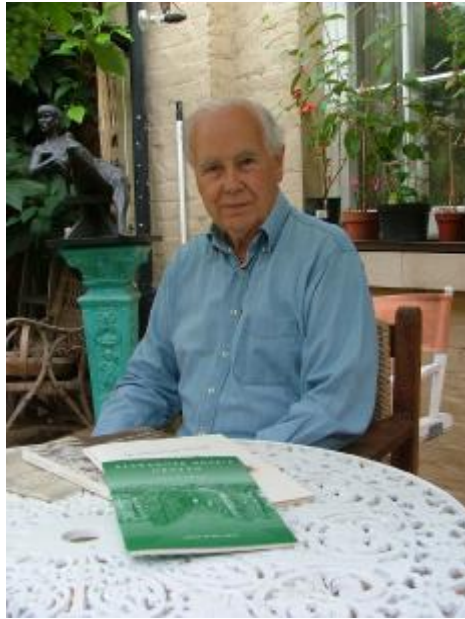
Others will know him as a former chairman of SHRA who introduced the custom of holding the AGMs in the Waldegrave Room at Strawberry Hill House. In 1988 he promoted the celebration of the tercentenary of the birth of Alexander Pope with a party in the Waldegrave Drawing Room and, in 1990, a celebratory dinner marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of SHRA. His latest, book, provisionally entitled *Mastiffs and Minerals*, describes Pope's fascination with his dynasty of dogs and the minerals and stones which, later, decorated the famous grotto. It will be published before Christmas.

Anthony's authorship began with the *History of Strawberry Hill\** which he edited, researched and shaped from a detailed script written by local resident Nicki Faircloth.

## Surprise appointment

A resident of Strawberry Hill since the 1960s, Anthony was pitched into the Chairman's seat during a low period in SHRA's history. He held the position for five years from 1986 to 1991.

"I arrived at my first AGM to be told 'here is the chair'...no discussion or warning; a complete surprise". The next morning the secretary resigned because, unlike Ralph Willcocks, the outgoing chairman,



Anthony Beckles Willson

he had not been formally thanked for his efforts. Fortunately, he was persuaded to withdraw it."

From then on SHRA had a structure and a new lease of life.

One of Anthony's early achievements was to draw the association closer to St Mary's College and Strawberry Hill House which gives the community its identity.

"Discussion with the College led to succeeding AGMs being held in the Waldegrave Room, the first attended by 130 members, Toby Jessel, MP, and all three Ward Councillors."

Anthony recalls that writing the history of Strawberry Hill was inspired by John Armstrong (still a member of the SHRA committee) and the enthusiasm of Nicki Faircloth.

The history is a perennial favourite, especially at Christmas when, it seems, people's thoughts turn to home. Recently, the book was reprinted for the second time and continues to sell steadily.

Anthony has been closely connected with Twickenham Museum since its inception in 1988: "the last of five local museums over the centuries. The first can be said to be Pope's 'cabinet of curiosities' in the grotto; the second was built by Thomas Twining - really it was about Victorian social engineering. A menagerie was set up in York House by the Comte de Paris in 1898, and the fourth was a small museum run by volunteers, also in York House, which closed in 1940."

## \* *Strawberry Hill, a history of the neighbourhood*

Published by The Strawberry Hill Residents' Association - available from SHRA Secretary Clare Phelps or Ottaker's.

Footnote: Anthony's other books are

- *Mr Pope and Others at Cross Deep Twickenham in the 18<sup>th</sup> century*
- *Alexander Pope's Grotto in Twickenham*
- *The Church of St Mary the Virgin, Twickenham*

## SHRA donation aids restoration



Bentley-Walpole gothic chair

## Students restore historic chairs

As part of the programme to mark our anniversary, SHRA donated £1,000 to the restoration project for Strawberry Hill House. The donation will be spent on replicating chairs from the Great Parlour.

*John Cross of London's Metropolitan University explains the work of his conservation students at Strawberry Hill House.*

While BSc. Conservation students have been documenting and researching various aspects of the house's interior the Higher National Diploma in furniture restoration students have commenced a project to recreate the Great Parlour Gothic chairs.

One of the original chairs is on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum and students, with the kind support of the Department of Furniture, Textiles and Interiors, have been along to take photographs, measurements and drawings for the making process.

Initially, a prototype chair will be made from American Walnut and from this pro-

totype the eight chairs will be manufactured. However, due to the complexity of the decoration, gothic tracery and carvings the chairs will have to be finished off by hand, which will be a very challenging task for the students!

It is envisaged that the proto chair will be ready by May 2006, discussion is still ongoing for the reproduction costs of the chairs.

Should this project run smoothly then in future years students will make other objects in the house. Next year it is hoped that the two William Hallett sofas in the Great Parlour will be produced.