

Diamond Jubilee - SHRA 60th Anniversary

Strawberry Hill Residents' Association – A Brief History Updated

In 2015, Robert Youngs, SHRA archivist, trawled through 50 years of minutes, Bulletins and letters. In 2025, Andrew Miller adds to that history from the past ten years. This article appears in Bulletin 185 in Spring 2025.

Trunk road threatens to split village

January 1965. Harold Wilson is Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill dies, the Beatles' "I Feel Fine" tops the charts, nine million viewers watch Coronation Street and Geoff Boycott takes 3 for 47 against South Africa. Then on Saturday the 9th, The Richmond and Twickenham Times published an article about a town centre development plan for Richmond, in which new arterial and "primary distributor" roads were proposed to relieve the traffic congestion. In Twickenham, one of these roads would have run from the A316 near Egerton Road, down Grove Avenue and into Strawberry Hill at Radnor Road, which was to be extended to join Waldegrave Road, near its junction with Waldegrave Gardens, and continue on to Broad Street in Teddington.

Widening Radnor Road would have led to the demolition of many homes, and a new extension between Tower Road and Waldegrave Road would have chopped the community in two. Headlines in the following issues of the R&TT said it all: "Houses may come down to make way clear", "Houses on road route are now unsaleable" and "Save our village battle".

Having merged two years earlier, Twickenham and Richmond Council existed only as a "shadow authority" before becoming Richmond-upon-Thames Council. Twickenham Council immediately issued a statement dismissing the plans as "seriously misleading" and complained that it had not been consulted. But Strawberry Hill residents decided to take no chances. They formed a group to oppose the plans and 450 people attended the first General Meeting of the Strawberry Hill Residents' Association on 11th February 1965 in St James' Hall - which, ironically, would probably have been demolished if the plan had gone ahead.

The first officers elected at the meeting included A W Holden (chairman), George R Kerpner (secretary), Cecil G Whithair (treasurer) and June Turner (vice-chair). The Committee's plans and decisions were published as Bulletin No. 1 and residents were encouraged to join the Association for a subscription of 5 shillings (25p).

Once the threat of the new road had subsided, the new Committee turned its attention to other local matters, including aircraft noise, already an issue 50 years ago; increases in domestic rates (75% over the 3 years to 1966 and still the highest in the Greater London area); traffic, parking and excessive development (Fortescue House School) - all topics which regularly concern residents today.

"New blood saves life of society"

This was a headline in the Surrey Comet in April 1985. A proposal to wind up the Association had been tabled at the AGM by the chairman at the time, Ralph Willcocks, because the

chairman and secretary planned to step down next year and new officers could not be found. The chairman told the meeting that there had been “lukewarm support for the Committee” and appealed for suitable members to join the committee. Fortunately, a new chairman, Christopher Fraser, was quickly nominated, and the whole Committee was re-elected and members offered their support with Bulletin distribution.

A birthday party for Alexander Pope

In 1988, the committee organised a party to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Alexander Pope's birth. Held in the Waldegrave Suite in Strawberry Hill House, festivities began with an 18th century punch (courtesy of Young's brewery) followed by a buffet supper. Entertainment took the form of readings and music, provided by a wind ensemble from the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall. Three hundred tickets were sold at £11.50 each.

Major planning applications opposed

Bulletin 12, in May 1969, noted that planning applications had been submitted for the development of two large pieces of land in the area: the Fortescue House School site, bordered by Wellesley, Hampton and Stanley Road, and the Glenside site, bordered by Walpole Gardens, Spencer Road and Popes Avenue.

The first, previously occupied by the Metropolitan & City Police Orphanage and later, Shaftesbury Homes School for Boys, caused Association members serious disquiet about over-development and traffic. Nonetheless, the project was approved in January 1971 and it is now Shaftesbury Way, with over 100 houses. The Glenside application, for an indoor sports centre with squash and badminton courts on open land, was refused after the Association objected in what proved to be the first skirmish in a 13-year battle against a series of attempts to develop the site. A subsequent application for more courts was refused in 1978. The final application, in 1982, for housing, was approved by the Planning Inspectorate - but not before the Association had incurred legal costs of approximately £1500 to fight it. The site is now occupied by 28 houses.

Radnor Works was a small industrial site on the river side of Strawberry Vale, occupied by Arthur T. Gibson, manufacturers of Kinnear Patent Steel Rolling Shutters and Gibson Patent Bi-folding Doors. Applications to develop the site were made and refused in 1971 and 1973. In 1977, despite objections and appeals by the Association, approval was finally granted for what is now Mallard Place, with over 50 houses. In 2016, St Mary's University's plans to expand student numbers by 70% over ten years (and which required building on Metropolitan Open Land and demolishing the athletics track), were strongly opposed by SHRA.

But the Association does not routinely oppose applications for development. Following principles laid down in the early 1970s, the Committee only intervenes if requested to do so by members. In all the cases above, there was considerable opposition from the Association's members and barely any supported them.

Subscriptions

The first committee established the annual subscription at 5/- (25p). This was raised to 50p in July 1983 to rebuild its depleted funds after fighting the Glenside development. Three years later, the subscription was raised to £1; then to £3 in 2003 and to £5 in December 2010. From 2020 subscriptions of £10 were 'recommended' with a £5 'minimum'. These increases are slightly below the rise in the Retail Price Index over the same period. The number of 'paying members' was 400 in March 1969, 630 in June 1974 and nearly 800 in October 1976.

The Bulletin

Since 1965, the Bulletin in paper form was distributed, free of charge to all homes in the area. Committee members wrote the articles and handled the layout, printing and organised distribution. For most of its 50 years, it has been distributed by volunteers, usually within a week of printing, apart from a short and ultimately unsuccessful period in the 1980s when it was distributed with free local papers. Distribution reverted to our more reliable volunteers. Since November 2007, it has been printed in four colours on at least six pages with advertising. The final hard-copy Bulletin was issue 173 in Spring 2021 and since then the Bulletin has been distributed online. The decision to go online was taken to save money, help the environment, avoid the need for manual distribution, and to allow the size of the bulletin to be increased.

History & heritage

SHRA has always been interested in researching and publishing local history. We were fortunate that in a pre-internet era, a committed former Chair, Anthony Beckles-Willson researched and wrote 'Strawberry Hill: A History of the Neighbourhood', now in its fifth edition. Peter Lamb researched our World War 1 soldiers for the 'Hunt for Heroes' series to commemorate the centenary. In 2019, SHRA launched its house history service and began publishing 'Streetwise', examining the history of particular streets in Strawberry Hill.

One of the original objectives of SHRA was to protect and promote our heritage assets. This is why we have keenly supported the work of Pope's Grotto Preservation Trust and Strawberry Hill House, our two most valuable heritage assets.

Promoting community spirit

In 2021, the SHRA Constitution was amended to include a new objective – 'to promote community spirit in Strawberry Hill'. This has led to the organisation of various social events to bring residents and Committee members together. These include the Family Picnics at Strawberry Hill House in 2022 and 2023. Our regular monthly litter picks around the Village have also given residents an opportunity to volunteer and make a difference to the area.