

The Friends of The Priory and Gardens AGM 27 February 2015 Chairman's Report

Well here's a thing, the Council is seeking to sell the Priory and move the museum exhibits into two static displays in Bromley Central Library!!!!!!

Therefore this is likely to be the last AGM of The Friends of the Priory and Gardens we ever hold - here or indeed anywhere !!

How you might wonder has this pretty pass come about - perhaps it is because the Council did not keep us in the loop when it came to the plans and schemes they were making in the hallowed, panelled walls of the Council offices. Indeed they - strangely - preferred to keep the whole matter under wraps until they could unveil it to the public as a "consultation" .

Now I am not one to vilify Bromley Council, but it is **BROMLEY** Council and not Orpington Council and the Priory is resolutely in Orpington and shows no signs of moving to Bromley Central, and thus our wonderful councillors are not that perturbed about selling the thing. It might be the oldest building in the Borough but it isn't **in** Bromley Central, equally The Priory might be the only thirteenth century building in the Borough , but as our representatives noted it is not **in** Central Bromley and so members can readily understand, as it is not **in** Central Bromley it can't be considered important.

Now the Friends of the Priory and Gardens have deplored this seeming slight upon both Orpington and The Priory, we have proposed and indeed tried to organise a dinner of the Great and the Good in the Orpington area so that we could raise the issue of the sale of the 13th Century Priory and the reduction of the museum to just two static displays in the Bromley Central Library. Sadly the great and the good in the Orpington Area did, for the most part, reject our offer of a free dinner and so we had to cancel it but, ever inventive, we have been involved in other efforts on Orpington's behalf, a petition has been raised and a detailed article for the News Shopper and The Bromley Times has been written (The News Shopper sadly seems not amenable to Orpington campaigns). Orpington heritage it would seem, is a case of you won't miss it until it has gone.

We have spoken about the proposed sale of the 13th Century Priory to our member of parliament Jo Johnson, we have convened with other interested parties and have attempted to raise an awareness of the closing of the Priory but this is at best an up-hill struggle because - as it has been on its site for thirteen centuries - almost everyone expects it to be there for a few more hundred years, everyone that is except our councillors and Bromley Council.

Our Orpington councillors have not, I have to say, covered themselves with glory regarding this affair; they have not been rushing to the forefront and standing tall over this matter. Instead I have been put in mind of wee small mousy things curled up in warm holes, deaf to the world and waiting for warmer days I wonder what the term *representative* means to our councillors, maybe if there was a council election in the offing they would stick their little heads out and squeak for Orpington, who can say ?

What then of the Priory Gardens?

Well we are fortunate in having the wonderful Caroll Long watching over this precious patch of land.

However, in the hallowed, panelled splendour of the Council chambers, our active and fantastically able Councillors and Council officers have seen fit to out-source the management of our beautiful gardens to some firm that promises to reduce the cost of the complex task of keeping nature in its place and God in his heaven.

As for the wonderful Carroll Long, she has been tasked to keep the Garden looking beautiful but at as low a cost as is humanly possible, the earth worms have been given the job of digging and the green fly are in charge of pruning, there is a rumour going about that delightful Carroll is to be made the saint of resourceless projects!

We are therefore in a situation that could be likened to a stalled car, we have an engine, we have a driver, we have wheels and fuel but the damn thing refuses to move or even make a judder. It seems remarkable to me that we can view the prospect of the destruction of a thirteenth century building and not attract any reaction from the powers that be.

Now I understand the economic realities that the Council faces, they have undoubtedly a very difficult budgetary problem. They have over the years relied upon the Government to hand out sufficient funds to pay for all the cream on their Council cake. Year after year they wanted more and for the most part have been given more from Government funds. But, like the Greek Government they have to face the fact that there isn't a never-ending pot of gold for them to dip into whenever they run short of a bob or two. They are now faced with reality and it is anything but comfortable. This does not however excuse or permit them to abandon the heritage factor, some duties cannot be ignored for the sake of profligate spending. Heritage is the duty they owe to the future and honeyed words about budgeting does not excuse yet more irresponsibility over the future.

Every child in Orpington deserves that its history is safeguarded, and is preserved for them, as proof of the world that existed before they were born. It gives them a context to their lives and a knowledge that life continues from one generation to the next. If we throw away our history we throw away our reason to exist *here* and we make ourselves cultural nomads.

I find the prospect of our losing the Priory and Museum profoundly disturbing, the more so as the population of Britain is expanded and the mix of people in places like Orpington becomes more divorced from their history. There is inevitably a lessening of community cohesion. Places like the Priory would normally act as a focus to strengthen such cohesion and bring us all to appreciate the background of that part of Greater London we call home and in which the roots of our lives are based. As the population becomes more diverse with people who have no long relationship with Orpington, where I wonder will they look to find that feeling of community and a sense of belonging ?

The Council and those who claim to represent us seem to me to be prepared to abdicate their responsibility and to walk away from the very nature of our community.