

## **The Friends of The Priory & Gardens AGM 27 February 2015**

As you are aware, in 2009, Bromley Council approved the moving of Orpington Library but you may not know that 3 possible options for the future of the building were proposed.

One of the options was to move the Museum and sell The Priory but initially option 3 was chosen – to refurbish the building and improve the museum offer by applying for funding and to offer space to small businesses. A lot of time and effort (and Council expense) was involved in drawing up a business plan and submitting a grant application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

However, last July, the Council withdrew from the HLF bid. They were not prepared to add funds nor to agree to maintain the Museum for 25 years and had been unsuccessful in getting paying tenants. But they kept their decision below the radar, with just a mention on the Priory Revisited website page – with ‘This page will be updated with further information in the coming months.’ But no updates have ever been posted.

Behind the scenes, officers were clearly tasked to investigate moving the Museum and selling the building but none of this was disseminated to local residents.

In December, Gillian Hughes, a history teacher at Perry Hall School, set up a petition against moving the museum which collected over 500 signatures but this went largely unnoticed, apart from an article in the News Shopper.

On 22 January, eagle-eyed residents spotted the agenda for the Renewal and Recreation Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee on Thursday 29 January, including an item ‘A New Approach for Bromley Museum’ which unexpectedly announced the proposal to move the museum and sell The Priory.

Fortunately, members of various local organisations and individuals leapt into action and several questions were submitted to the Scrutiny Committee, but the recommendation was still approved to go forward to the Executive on 11 February.

On 2 February I set up an e-petition and circulated it via social media, using #StopOrpPriorySale. Within a week we had 1600 signatures, over 1000 from residents in the borough. I let the Council know!

In addition, so many questions were submitted to the Executive that the Council began to realise they were not going to be able to sneak through their proposal. When we arrived at the meeting, they had already deferred their decision, pending wider consultation (not that there had been any about the sale) – a quick win for our campaign but we knew we needed to act quickly.

After the meeting, a group of us met outside and a number of ideas were bounced around. Since then numerous email exchanges have produced an excellent draft document, prepared by Carol Pitman, a local resident. It sets out the background, options and ideas put forward so far.

We were delighted to join up with The Friends through Eileen Vassie. Coincidentally, I had discovered that The Priory was not on the borough's list of Assets of Community Value and found that you had been trying to find out how to submit an application. I sent Eileen the relevant link on the Council website and a copy of the form and I understand you are now submitting an application. Being an 'Asset' will mean that the Council must consult with the community in the event of a sale and has to allow six weeks for community organisations to decide if they wish to submit a bid. If one decides to do so, then a further six months is allowed to put together the funding for the bid.

Many of our campaign group are here tonight and we are hoping that, working together, we can win over the Council to agree to make a Community Asset Transfer, so it can be run by a charitable trust or partnership which will need to be set up, whilst the building remains under Council ownership. At worst, we could try to get enough funding to bid in the event of a sale. But a lot of preparation is involved in making this happen, so we need all the expertise and support you can contribute and sponsors to fund us.

Social media has been key in spreading awareness but we now need to 'up the anti' and spread our message nationally. If it can happen here, it can happen elsewhere. The e-petition currently stands at nearly 2,000 signatures but more are needed to show the Council how strongly local residents feel.

The Priory is a beautiful building, sadly little known and under-used. Despite the surrounding park and gardens which see a lot of people passing through, many local residents are still unaware that they have such a wonderful asset and a museum on their doorstep. We must change that. This is an opportunity to create a haven within our conservation area which people will use and appreciate. A café and gift shop would encourage walkers in the park to stop off and we need clear signage in the high street to highlight this gem in our midst.

Nothing is impossible if we all muck in and make it happen!