**A Storm in a Coffee Cup?**

This is a longer version of an article in the Friends’ August newsletter.

The Friends’ committee were alarmed to discover an application for consent under the Listed Buildings legislation to install the fixtures for a café in the large room which is on your right as you enter the building from its main entrance. There is a Planning Permission to use a quarter of the room as a café but not the rest of it. The implication was that a café would be opened in breach of Planning controls, without any restriction on opening hours or measures to mitigate noise penetrating the library and the four flats above the library.

The part of Lambeth Council dealing with Listed Buildings and Planning applications is legally required to consider applications independently of the rest of the Council. On making enquiries, we ascertained that no application has been made to Lambeth as owners of the building and, if one is received, it will be considered on its merits. This would necessarily include the impact on the library and the flats.

The proposal to turn the room into café was originated by the Carnegie Community Trust. They currently control the room and three other large rooms under a temporary arrangement with Lambeth which comes up for review and possible termination every three months. They hire out the rooms for various activities, but this leaves the rooms empty nearly all the time. Quite how many rooms are needed for this hiring is debatable but, in any event, the room with which are immediately concerned is surplus to the Trust’s requirements. Without making appropriate enquiries, they seem to have simply assumed that the room is available for turning into a café.

The room does not in fact appear to be available, because on the information we currently have Lambeth has plans which will bring all four rooms back into full-time use.

Until the closure of the library in 2016, two of the rooms were hired out a month at a time as desk or studio spaces to artists and others, generating an income equal to about one-third of the cost of providing our library while supporting local creative industries. We can be sure Lambeth want to revive this use because:

* The finances of local authorities are under increasingly serious strain as the central government continuously reduces the amounts it provides them with. The Council needs the revenue.
* The hirers were lovely people who expanded the library’s provision in several ways, including using its exhibition space and providing free workshops for children. They never caused any problems. Few library users and neighbours even knew they were using space in the building.
* These hires provide a steady year-round income and require little staff time to administer. This contrasts with the Trust’s room hires which are more sporadic and require much more administration, leaving the Trust unable to cover its expenditure.
* Lambeth is currently setting up similar operations to hire out desk spaces in Brixton and Streatham Libraries.

The purposes for which the Trust hires out rooms can be divided into three categories:

1. Uses which the Trust should never have introduced into the building, which we can expect Lambeth will want to terminate. An example is the Raise the Roof Choir. The singing and foot stomping they describe in their poster is no doubt great fun, but it does not belong in a building containing flats or quiet activities. They should be raising the roof of a building in which there is no one to disturb such as the Herne Hill United Church Hall, St Paul’s Church Hall or the detached buildings in the grounds of the Half Moon and the Florence.
2. Uses which are more appropriate to the basement gym, which we expect Lambeth will want to move down there. An example is the karate classes.
3. Uses compatible with the library that were present until the library closed in 2016 and which we can expect Lambeth to want to retain, such as craft workshops and yoga.

The Council will need to accommodate the retained activities and from time-to-time want to add some more. Also, the library is attracting ever more users and will soon, if it does not do so already, need more space. The librarians are skilled in making the best use of available spaces and are likely to be able to fit the extension of the library and the category 3 activities into one of the rooms.

The remaining room appears to be available if one looks at Carnegie Library in isolation. However, Lambeth is juggling spaces in other libraries to provide rooms for income generation. So, they may well need to move some “back office” services into our building.

The Friends have long wanted a café service in the library, but we have not been able to find a way of providing one which pulls in enough sales to cover the cost of employing someone to do the work. If we make the seemingly very big assumption that the room is available, it is worth considering how the operator of the café might be able to make it pay. I have chatted with the proposed operator, Carolina, about her plans. She comes across as very enterprising and resourceful. She would tailor her opening hours to fit with when trade is available. Initially she would try for daytime trade and later apply for a licence with the aim of developing evening trade. I really cannot see there being enough custom before lunchtime at the earliest. The fixtures in the application for Listed Building consent are for a café and bar serving drinks and snacks but not full meals, with heating up food on site but not cooking.

The Trust have suggested that there will be custom from gym users and when children are collected from Jessop’s, St Saviour’s and Bessemer Grange Primary Schools. However, the gym has few users at present. After-school trade from Jessop’s and St Saviour’s sounds promising, though many of the families may be too poor to visit cafés regularly. The library is out of the orbit of Bessemer Grange.

On two occasions previously, the Trust proposed paving over the “L” shaped section of ornamental garden on the corner of Herne Hill Road and Ferndene Road, which gets sun in the evening. They did not give any reason for this that the Friends’ committee found convincing. The senior ward councillor, Jim Dickson, assured local residents that the Council will not permit use of that area for drinking and smoking in connection with a bar, if one were to be installed in the building. I cannot imagine the flat owners or other neighbours being willing to tolerate the use of any other garden area for evening drinking. The absence of such a space, would surely have an adverse effect on developing evening trade. There is a bar on Herne Hill and, in the opposite direction, the Cambria Pub. Both of these are less than ten minutes’ walk from the library and do have outside seating.

The main source of custom appears to be the library’s users, of whom there are currently about 3,600. This does not seem promising. Cafés have been opened in other libraries up and down the country, many in larger libraries than ours, but most have failed financially and closed.

All the indications seem to be that if the café’s trade could be built up to the point where it would pay, this would be a long haul, which raises two problems. The first is whether Lambeth would be willing to let the room at the sort of rent this suggests. The rental value of the room in 2016 was £10 per square foot inclusive of all services. I do not imagine it has changed much since. The room has an area of 1661 square feet, making the full rent £16,610. However, given the difficulty of establishing the business, Carolina would be looking for a substantial rent-free period and, I suspect, a reduced rent thereafter. So, for example, if she had two years rent free followed by a year at a third of the full rent and then a year at two-thirds of the full rent, that would only be an average rent in the first five years of £6,650 a year.

The other problem is that we are back to the question of whether the room is available. Minet Library currently houses a local library, the Archives and the Home Visit Service. The Archives are in the later stages of moving to new premises. The library building is an undistinguished one from the 1950s and it is in poor repair. It is on a site which is several times larger than the footprint of the building. It is a prime site for redevelopment, either as flats with the local library on the ground floor or just as flats, with a new local library nearby on the edge of Myatts Fields park. Within two or three years, we can expect redevelopment plans to have reached the stage when the Home Visit Service has to be moved elsewhere. The only practical location available, so far as I can see, is Carnegie Library. The Service needs an office and space for roller stacks for the Service’s large stock of books. If the room is available for a café now, it does not look as if it would be available for long enough to enable Carolina to reap the reward of building up the business or for Lambeth collect a worthwhile amount of rent.

If the room is going to be available for long enough, there is still a substantial obstacle in the way of a successful outcome. The building transmits sound. Any loud noise in the library or surrounding rooms can be heard in the library and the four flats. Even normal conversation in the rooms below can be heard in the first-floor flats. This feature of the building was almost certainly a deliberate design choice incorporated by the architect. The four flats were originally the Librarian’s living accommodation and there was a stairway, now blocked off, by which he could get down into the library quickly to sort out any problems. The room proposed for the café was designed for silent reading and there is not much internal wall between it and the library. Instead, there are two large arches filled with glass only 6mm thick and at lower level by wooden boards, all of which is in a wooden frame. If the café is to be profitable, it will have large numbers of people talking and competing to be heard over other speakers. Also, we have been advised by a manager of the library that the noises made by an expresso coffee machine would not be acceptable in the library, especially as the sounds are made at irregular intervals, which makes them particularly intrusive. Obviously, work would be needed to attenuate the noise down to acceptable levels. Fortunately, we have definite figures for the loudness that should be accepted. Earlier this year, the Mayor of London exercised some of his powers over Planning to specify the maximum sound levels that can be tolerated in flats. These are 35dB in a living room, whether the sound comes from other rooms in the flat or from outside, reduced to 30dB in a bedroom between 11pm and 7am. The 35dB would seem to be appropriate also to the library. A professional acoustician would have to be engaged to advise on what work would be needed but, at this present stage, it is reasonable to infer that the work would be expensive. As this is a Listed Building, it would not be possible to block the light coming through the arches.

The Trust argue that there will not be a problem with noise because they believe noise from the room has not been a problem in the past. My own knowledge of the room goes back to 1999. Before the closure of the library in 2016, it was used by the library service for back-office functions which did not generate significant noise. Since reopening, the room has almost always been empty, but I have heard complaints about noise from children’s parties held there.

A specific problem is noise from the toilets. This would not have been seen as a problem when the existing Permission to use a quarter of the room was given because the accessible toilet near the café would then have been sufficient. If the whole room is to be used, then more toilets will be needed. So, either the toilets in the basement would have to be made available or the acoustician would have to come up with a solution that would allow the toilets underneath the flats to be used.

Carolina has not incurred any expense in connection with the café proposal. She assures us that she does appreciate the need for “sound proofing” to be carried out and that she will not incur any expenditure until this and lease terms are sorted out. The Trust appear to be adamant that they will not contribute to the cost of investigating what is needed and carrying out the work. The Friends do not have surplus funds available for this. Only the Council appears to be left as a possibility to bear the expense.

As the café proposal would be expensive for the Council to implement, an attempt has to be made to assess the public benefit from the café. A statement from the Trust was included in the application for Listed Building consent and they subsequently added comments after objections were raised to the application. None of this material from the Trust is at all helpful. It is framed in terms of the café replacing the library as “the” hub of the local community. They have pursued this aim since their original inception in 2012. They obviously believe there is something wrong with a library being a hub of the local community. The only reason I have been able to trace is in the minutes of a meeting between representatives of the Trust and Council officers. The Trust argued that libraries only appeal to middle class white people and that a hub for others is therefore needed. Nobody taking an interest in Lambeth’s libraries could think this. I do not have any statistics on the social class of library users, class being a nebulous concept anyway. However, I do have figures for ethnicity. In February, a survey of Lambeth library users was carried out under the auspices of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. Survey respondents stated their ethnicities, and we can compare these with the ethnicity figures for Lambeth from the 2021 Census. They are practically identical:

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| **Ethnicity** | **2021 Census %** | **2023 Survey %** |
| White | 55 | 60 |
| Black | 24 | 22 |
| Mixed | 8.1 | 9 |
| Asian | 7.3 | 7 |
| Other | 5.7 | 3 |

The same survey invited respondents to tick boxes to identify what visiting Carnegie Library had helped them with and the results in percentages were as follows:

* Study/learning 51
* Health and wellbeing 42
* Meeting people 33
* Getting online 17
* Family relationships 33
* My job 12
* Job seeking 4
* Retirement 12
* Personal finance/consumer matters 4

This is surely a better place to make a start on assessing benefit to the community. The 33% of library users who benefitted from meeting people seems the key statistic for a constructive approach to assessing the likely benefit from the café. It is reasonable to ask what the café would add to what is already offered by the library. The answer, so far as I can tell, is that it would enable large groups of people to socialise and quickly meet their neighbours. The library provides opportunities to meet people. It also offers its sofa and easy chairs amongst the stacks for private conversations but only two or three people can take part without making noise which would disturb other library users. A café would clearly augment the library in promoting social cohesion. If the room will be available, Lambeth may therefore want to go at least as far as obtaining advice from an acoustician on what would be needed to reduce noise to the 35dB and 30dB levels.

We may reasonably doubt whether this café proposal will come to anything. However, we can hope that we will end up with a library and café service which will be not only compatible but complementary.

*Stephen Carlill,*

Chair of the Friends