



THE TOWN HOUSE TIMES

Issue 1
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REVIEWS AND UPCOMING EVENTS

REVIEW - Many of you will have found your Friend's Application form at our May exhibition, Brighton Palermo Remix. Staged as a major Brighton Festival and HOUSE 2012 co-commission, Remix showcased the work of internationally recognized artist, David Batchelor. We have been delighted with the response to the exhibition; strong positions were adopted by most viewing the work and by far the majority responded very positively. We are awaiting final figures but it is already clear that the exhibition broke our Brighton Festival attendance record. We will update you in due course with exact numbers.

If you took any photos of the displays we would welcome receiving copies. These can be emailed to, nick@rth.org.uk.



Brighton Palermo Remix - David Batchelor
(photo: Bernard G Mills)

UPCOMING - Between 6 and 9 September we will be presenting Brighton & Hove Open Door (BHOD).

Staged as a part of the national Heritage Open Days, (HODs) BHOD is our celebration of local architecture and culture. About half of the events offered usually require pre-booking and this year our Friends group will have an exclusive seven day priority booking window. We will list the BHOD programme on our website as of mid-August. Further details about priority booking rights will be circulated to Friends ahead of this.

BHOD is one of the UK's largest HODs events and is sure to offer a great selection of free activities this year so be sure to diarise the dates.

Welcome to this first publication of the new Friends of The Regency Town House.

As you all know, the Town House is a developing heritage centre, focused principally on life in Brighton between the late-18th and early-19th centuries. We already offer online services and outreach events about the Regency and we are aiming eventually, to provide a set of accurately restored rooms that specifically reflect town house life during the 1820s and 30s.

In addition to our principal focus, we look also to Brighton & Hove's wider history and culture and this leads us to offer events in collaboration with a number of well established annual initiatives, including for example, Heritage Open Days and the Brighton Festival. At the Town House, it's not unusual to find team members working on aspects of local geology, 19th century records and a contemporary art exhibition, all in the same day.

Whether your main interest is historical or contemporary we are very grateful to you for having become a Friend of the Regency Town House and we would ask that you please encourage others to do likewise. We are hugely dependant upon individuals for support, receiving no significant inputs from either local or central government.

All of us at the Town House look forward to sharing our activities with you and meeting you as Friends, over the coming months. Until then, best wishes and our thanks once again.

Nick Tyson
Curator

Building maintenance advice

We have produced a rather lengthy first issue, with two long entries in section 2. We don't want to over burden you and so we've decided to forgo offering any building maintenance advice this time round. However, it's well worth us noting that in future publications we will be covering a whole range of topics relevant to those living in period buildings or concerned with their conservation. In the next few issues we will be mastering on Bungaroush (flint and lime walling), Brick Walls, 18th and 19th Century renders, mastics and artificial stones, and, thereafter, Sash Windows.



News about our buildings and projects

It seems appropriate, as we launch the new Friends group, to visit the origins of the Town House project. The first part of the article "How it all began" is drawn from an earlier Town House publication setting out the project's initial development. The second part, to be published in the next edition, will pick up from 1995, when the basement annex of the project, at 10 Brunswick Square, was first acquired.



How it all began

Thousands of people have taken the opportunity to visit the Regency Town House, but few are aware of how the project began and how much hard work and dedication has been needed to get this far.

Back in 1984, Nick Tyson our Curator was looking for somewhere to live. Having a keen interest in the heritage of Brighton and Hove, he was appalled at the state of the Regency houses he visited. Most had been badly converted into flats or had their original features ripped out. When the basement of No.13 Brunswick Square came up for sale, although empty for 26 years and deemed unfit for habitation, it still retained many original features and had lots of potential. It was the renovation of this property that sewed the seed for the Regency Town House heritage centre. Nick recalls:

'I noticed that the museums in the area did not tend to focus on the town's urban history and tell you much about ordinary life in the Regency period. I hoped there was a way we could do something about this and set about creating a heritage site to help people understand the importance of historic Brighton. In time we planned to renovate the whole house, step by step, to its original state. We believed this would take nearly twenty years but, in actual fact, the other flats became available in a very short space of time and the renovation process became a full time activity between the 1980's and early 1990's.'



Once the flats had been purchased, an enormous amount of work and money was required to reinstate the building into a sound condition. Nick freely admits 'if I could have foreseen how long it would take and how difficult the funding would be, I would have thought seriously about the sense of doing it'. Fortunately he continued and thanks to the generous support of builder's merchants, suppliers and some of the finest craftspeople in the area who gave their services for free, or at a reduced rate, by 1992 £1.3 million worth

of restoration work had been completed on the house of a cost of only £300,000. Much of the hard work however, was carried out by Nick and friends under the guidance of the professionals.

'We had very little buildings know-how at the start of the project and whilst a lot of the work was straightforward common sense, we also needed skilled help. We had to learn how to carry out structural repairs and how to reinstate floors, door, walls and ceilings to their original condition, whilst every discovery and change had to be documented for future reference'

While this was taking place, Nick became friends with an elderly lady that lived in the basement of No. 10 Brunswick Square and would fetch her groceries. He discovered that her home was a 'time capsule' full of original Regency features and virtually untouched by time. Nick says:

'Her parents had worked as housekeepers in No's 9 & 10 and after their death, she stayed on in that position at a wage of £2.6s a week. She would gladly allow me to tape record all her memories but would never pose for a photograph, saying she didn't want any fuss. She was always embarrassed at how old fashioned and plainly decorated her home was and found it difficult to believe she was living in an architectural gem! The basement contained many startling features such as a walk-in meat safe, with wire mesh panels to keep the meat cool and bug free. The wine cellar door even had remains of the wax used by the butler to seal over the lock to prevent light fingered servants from tampering with it while he was away.'

Later, when the old lady was in her 80's and in poor health, she was moved into sheltered accommodation and the whole building was sold to developers. It was then that Nick decided to try to preserve her wonderful home. The development company gave the Regency Town House three months to raise the money needed - the race was on! A bid to the newly created National Lottery was made but additional monies were essential and so a huge fund raising campaign was put into action. People were invited to visit the basement and see for themselves how valuable it was. Nick recalls:

'The interest in No. 10 was phenomenal. People were so impressed with what they saw that many visitors made contributions on the spot and even sent in second donations. They were determined not to sit back and let an historical gem end up in a builders skip. The general public gave nearly £15,000 and the developers kindly agreed to wait a few more months. It was announced in June 1995 that the Regency Town House was the recipient of the first ever Heritage Lottery Fund grant in the South East and with their support the basement was saved.

The acquisition of the basement paved the way for the project seen today but it also greatly increased the physical repair demands faced by Nick and the Town House team. More of that in the next issue...

The MyHouseMyStreet project

The following article is derived from Nione Meakin's recent piece for the BBC's 'Who Do You Think You Are?' magazine. Nione is a local journalist and a Town House volunteer in her spare time.



In 2008, using street directories and census information, volunteers compiled data about the people who had lived in each house in Foundry Street in the North Laine area over the past 200 years. They asked residents to display the lists in the front windows of their homes. The event was hugely popular and has continued every year since, taking in more streets and more homes.

Historic streets

With the aid of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant in 2010, volunteers have now compiled data for 25 streets that are deemed historic – that is, those that have existed long enough to be included in several censuses and street directories.

So far, each has been researched piecemeal, with volunteers gathering the specific data for each street from public records. Now it is the public's turn to get involved and help transcribe data for the remaining streets (around 475) to make MHMS one of the most comprehensive digital catalogues of its kind.

Brighton and Hove City Council has provided access to its street directories, which cover a period from 1784 up until the early 1970s. A total of 100,000 pages have been digitised, tagged by volunteers and made available online.

MHMS is now waiting to hear if The National Archives will provide digital images of the census information for the city so that volunteers can transcribe them. Project leader Nick Tyson feels that this would represent a huge advance for the project, making Brighton the only city in the country where full census information could be accessed from home without cost or hassle. "Once we have the images, we hope to tag them to create an index and then transcribe the records. We would also include a correction system for those who wish to offer an alternative reading. We are hoping that people will eventually add their own personal archives to the site."

Nick is keen to collate both census and directory details to provide the fullest picture to site users. "Although the census gives great detail about residents, it is just a snapshot taken every ten years. Street directories, while less detailed, cover a much broader period and can help fill in the gaps". Both types of records are available across the UK, making the project easy to migrate more widely.

Continued on page 4



Queen's Gardens in Brighton, one of the 'ordinary' streets of cottages that feature in the project

Imagine typing an address into a website wand within seconds, being presented with a comprehensive list of all the census data and street records that relate to it. You could be provided with the names of all the people who have lived in that area in the past 200 years, their occupations, ages, places of birth, maybe photographs and personal documents – all without paying a penny.

This is the ambition of the team behind MyHouseMyStreet (MHMS <http://mhms.org.uk>), a new online history resource based in the seaside city of Brighton, East Sussex.

The project grew out of The Regency Town House, a listed building and heritage centre



A street directory from 1921 showing the inhabitants of Gloucester Road

that co-ordinates Brighton's contribution to the nationwide Heritage Open Days. While Brighton is renowned for the grand, stuccoclad architecture the town house encapsulates, organisers wanted to demonstrate the historical importance of its less celebrated streets.

Continued from page 3

Eventually, Nick would also like to include the electoral roll on the site, which would allow users to find out not only who lived in a house, but who owned it (in poorer areas, homes were usually rented from a landlord).

This summer, the project's volunteers will get together and begin tagging the content of each page in the street directories and (if approved) the local censuses. This will allow members of the public to search for an area or name they are interested in and begin transcribing the information on those pages.

The public can play their part

Nick has been encouraged by the phenomenal success of www.OldWeather.org – the online weather data project that invites members of the public to help digitise weather observations recorded in Royal Navy log books during the early 20th century. The project has seen one million pages of data transcribed by a public eager to play their part in scientific research.

He hopes MHMS will capture people's imaginations in a similar fashion and speed

the process of creating a valuable social history resource. "It would appear there is a fantastic amount of enthusiasm for this sort of thing within the public domain. Because it's all online, it means you can be anywhere in the world and get involved. There might be someone in Brisbane with family connections to Brighton – this allows them to get online and make a contribution so that people like them can find out about the city and where they have come from."

As things progress, Nick hopes people will be inspired to add personal documents to the site, so a search for a property or street brings up not only its street directory listing and census data but old photographs, deeds and architectural plans.

Projects similar to MHMS have been carried out in various villages and towns across the UK, but Nick says that generally these are places with populations of no more than 5,000. "By the time this database ends in the 1970s, Brighton's population is over 100,000 people. Historians in the future will be very keen to use this resource to understand better how people lived in a rapidly developing urban space in the 19th and 20th centuries."

Over 100 volunteers have assisted the project so far. Catherine Page has volunteered for several years, after completing an MA in Life History Research. Last year, she worked on a social history of Over Street, researched using the census, street directories, the county record office and the local history archive at Brighton Museum. "I was quite overwhelmed by the number of people who lived in any one house - up to 19 - with very few facilities," she says. "I was also very struck by the lack of men after the First World War. That may seem obvious, but there is nothing quite so stark as seeing the actual lack of people in the 1921 census."

Catherine is enthralled by social history and the role it plays in developing a better understanding of where we have come from and where we might be going. "It's important because we could all have been there. The people we're investigating and the lives they led are not so very far removed from our own. These were the generations of our own great grandparents, grandparents and even parents. This is about people's history. This is about family."

For more information about the MyHouseMyStreet project, or to volunteer as a transcriber, visit www.mhms.org.uk

VOLUNTEER *inputs*



This issue we hear from Ellen Scaife, our Librarian and Archivist

Welcome to this section of the newsletter. My name is Ellen. I currently work as a professional librarian at the University of Brighton. I first got involved as a volunteer at the Regency Town House when unemployed in August 2006. I originally helped set up the Denman Drawings Archive at the Town House, organising

the images into different categories by location, author, etc. (the Denmans were local builders, surveyors and architects responsible for many properties in the town and beyond- including, for example, the very fine Barclays Bank building in North Street, Brighton) I then found work and did not come back again until April 2007.

At this time, I was persuaded to catalogue the RTH library. Nick introduced me to the Bevan Letters which have now been transcribed and digitised. As a result of my work at the Town House I decided to enrol on a course for Archives Administration. As of summer 2012, I have just about finished this study programme.

My work at the Town House today continues to include organising the library and keeping it in order. I'm also responsible for maintaining the ever-growing archives.

My 'office' (except in the coldest part of the winter) is in the Housekeeper's Room, which is in the basement of No.13. It has been restored to how it would have originally looked. The cupboards in the alcoves, the doors, window shutters, and the chair rail have all been grained. Graining is a paint technique, which makes inexpensive soft wood look like an expensive hardwood.

In addition, the room has a flat-weave carpet generously donated to RTH, with the edge stitched on by a number of our very dedicated volunteers. The room is at the front of the house, and has the best of the natural light. In an era before effective and

inexpensive artificial lighting, this would have been very important! The Town House library is continually growing and includes a range of items to help the volunteers with their research. We have a large section on the history of Brighton, Hove and surrounding areas. All this material is held in the Decker's Room, where the volunteers meet and work. Other material includes books covering the Georgian period, works on architecture and interior decoration, and a small literature section.

RTH has a number of archives. For example, we hold a portion of the Jackson collection, which we share with the V&A. George Jackson was an ornamental plaster who set up in the early-19th century and went on to run the greatest ornamental firm of his day. We have a number of pattern boards and moulds from the company, some of the formed being up to two metres long. The boards were originally used to show potential clients how finished ornaments would look.

The Bevan Letters form another archives for us. This correspondence, between Silvanus and Louisa Bevan, and other family members, was written through much of the 19th century and wonderfully illuminates aspects of life at the time. We hear about a range of issues, including everyday matters that relate to servants, travelling, the weather and the family. In one letter, for example, Charlotte writes about a horse-drawn coach that she wants to purchase, accompanying it with a sketch of the vehicle.

The latter components of this collection include letters relating the death of Robert Malcolm Dewar, a 12-year old family member who died at sea whilst engaged in the Crimea war. Other topics mentioned in the second half of the century include a shorthand notebook and the purchase of a turkey for Christmas.

Overall the letters illustrate many changes over the 50 years they span. The earliest letters are written on single sheets of paper, folded and sealed. The later ones – from 1856 on – are written on note paper and posted in envelopes which have stamps. The letters, images and transcriptions, are available to view on the Town House website, <http://www.rth.org.uk/>