EALING CIVIC SOCIETY

Open Ealing, Unit 14, School Lane, Dickens Yard, W5 2TD

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Tribute to Ealing *by*

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, outgoing President of the Society

Lightly Edited Version

Madam Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I cannot tell you how delighted I am by the news that Steve Pound, the former MP for North Ealing, is to be my successor. I have had many delightful encounters with him, often as we travelled into Westminster together. And I am delighted to see that he is features, extremely positively, in the Denis Macshane's newly published diary of the first years of the Blair government.

Eleven years ago, I was lucky enough to deliver the John Delafons Lecture to this Society, in the presence of the family of that great public servant who did so much to establish what was then the Department of the Environment as a force for good in the life of this nation, and who was praised so warmly by Richard Crossman in his diaries.

I suspect that one result of that Lecture was that I was invited a few years later to take on the Presidency of this Society, a role from which, after five happy but shamefully inactive years, I am stepping down today.

Although the proximate cause of that decision was the imminent sale of my beautiful house in St Mary's Road, built in 1726 as one of two workhouses for the poor of St Mary's Parish, I am happy to say that I am not leaving this beloved Borough. I am moving to cheap, cheerful and furnished temporary accommodation even closer to the centre of Ealing, while I plot where and how to spend my seventies.

Today, though, I want to pay tribute to Ealing, and cheer you up, by accentuating the positive. In doing so, I will speak about the three types of environment which make a place: the social environment, the natural environment, and – the main preoccupation of this Society – the built environment.

<u>The Social Environment</u>

And I want to start with the social environment – the people of Ealing, and of this Society. In two stories.

When I heard early last week that the buyers of my house wanted to complete the sale by the end of April – I had expected a process that had been somewhat leisurely until then to stretch into June – I needed urgently to find somewhere to rent and live.

To do so, I approached several local estate agents, all of whom were keen to help. But the keenest of all was a young trainee lettings agent who had been *made by* Ealing, and who was now helping <u>*make*</u> Ealing. His energy, enthusiasm and sheer kindness – for example, running me to the station in his trademark Mini – stood out. But it was his family story that struck me.

Unlike us *soi-disant* toffs of Walpole Ward, or the nobs in the great Victorian and Edwardian villas on the heights north of the Broadway, this young man's parents arrived in Ealing with nothing, fleeing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. His father now runs a kebab shop in Ruislip. The son went to Dormers Wells school, and then Greenford College, and has worked variously as a waiter and for Amazon before finding what I expect to be his vocation as an estate agent. Although his parents – especially his mother – remain devout Muslims, he observes the forms of his faith, eschewing pork and alcohol in the company of his family, going to the mosque most Fridays, and, most important, fasting for Ramadan, or Ramazan as it is known in Afghanistan, which he was doing – to his obvious but proud discomfort – when he rushed me around from property to property.

A second story: a week earlier, as an Honorary Freeman of this Borough, I had been invited to attend a curious, and very civic, ceremony at Perceval House, during which the Leader of the Council and the Representative Deputy Lieutenant of London unveiled the new official portrait of our King. But it was the guests at the ceremony who intrigued me most: His Worship the Mayor in all his somewhat moth-eaten municipal majesty, many members of the Council in their glorious heterogeneity, two Rabbis, two High Anglican priests at the heart of this Borough's Anglo-Catholic tradition, and a black-robed Benedictine monk from Ealing Abbey.

It was the French school in Hanwell – named after the philosopher, writer and resistance hero, André Malraux, who served for ten years under de Gaulle as France's first minister of culture – that brought my family to Ealing. I had been here only twice before: to visit a fellow undergraduate from Oxford of uncompromisingly Italian habits who lived with his mother in Creffield Road, and once, when working for the Foreign Secretary, for Robin Cook to speak to the Ealing Labour Party shortly before the IRA detonated a bomb on Ealing Broadway.

And, on coming to live here in 2011, I was delighted to see the sign on the green pointing to the beautiful suburb of Lille with which we are twinned, Marcq-en-Baroeul, where I did my French immersion training before starting in the Embassy in Paris shortly before Diana, Princess of Wales, was killed.

I soon fell in love with this Borough – the people, the parks, and the place – and have now spent 13 happy years here, with more to come.

What I liked about Ealing immediately was that I could walk along the Broadway and hear being spoken so many of the languages I had known and sometimes used in three decades in the Diplomatic Service: English, of course, in all its many varieties of class and accent; French; Polish; Bulgarian and its Balkan cousins; Punjabi; Arabic; Pashto and Dari; Japanese; and both Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese.

When I spoke to this Society in 2013, I said that Ealing today was a microcosm of the modern city. Ealing was London's third largest and third most diverse borough. Only one third of population were white British, 45% white, 14% Indian. Among the other facts from the 2011 Census, Ealing had:

- the highest number of Poles (21,500, up six times since 2001) among London Boroughs;
- nearly 7,000 Afghans – I learnt Pashtu in Northolt;
- 450 Serbs;
- 2800 Japanese (2nd to Barnet);
- 3000 Iranians (2nd to Barnet);
- 10,000 Arabs, including Assyrian Christians;
- 68 Druze compared with 81 in Westminster;
- half of its residents born outside UK; and
- three main languages: English, Polish and Punjabi.

It was not just the ethnic breakdown of Ealing's population that was changing. The Borough had seen a 32% rise in its pre-school population since the last census. Ealing had fewer old people, and more families with dependent children, than the average London or Outer London Borough.

In preparing this talk, I haven't had time to update the research I did then. But I imagine – and many of you will know – that this astonished diversity continues to make this Borough so strong and so special. *E pluribus unum*. Despite the tragedy of Brexit, Ealing's people will survive, and prosper.

But, in concluding my remarks on the social environment, I want also to say a word about the people who occupy the commanding heights – both official and unofficial – of the public life of this Borough.

I want, first, to pay tribute to all that the Ealing Civic Society has done, in so many ways and over so many years, to make this Borough a better place. People like Bob Gurd, and your Chair, Ann Chapman, and her husband, Patrick, who have dedicated so much of their time to our civil society, not just through the ECS, but also through the Film Festival, for example, or even as our elected representatives on the Council. Or the indomitable Corinne Templer, who ran the Ealing Green Conservation Panel, and never missed an opportunity to raise with me the bicycle racks outside Pitzhanger – or peace in the Middle East!

Not to mention Philippa Dolphin and Josette Bishop, as well as John Sears and Viv Cane-Honeysett who did so much – who do so much – to help with Pitzhanger.

Which brings me to the Council. I learnt, through months and years of negotiating with them over the Pitzhanger Manor project, that they are not, and never should be, the enemy. The officers, and Councillors, with whom I worked on Pitzhanger and on the continuing effort to replace the Gurnell Leisure Centre with something worthy of West London, wanted – want – what we all want: a better Borough. Of course, they have different pressures and priorities, notably in terms of budgets and politics and policies, both local and national. But in my experience, they are dedicated to their work, and receive relatively little reward for what they do. It is almost always better to work with them rather than against them.

The Built Environment

I want next to say a brief word about the places we build for ourselves.

Ten years ago, the Elizabeth Line, then known as Crossrail, was a distant dream: now it is Britain's busiest railway, and a delightful connector not just of communities, from West Ealing to Woolwich, across the capital, but through its links to Heathrow, and, via its sister railways, to the airports at Gatwick, Stansted, Luton and even Southend, and thus also of Britain with the world. It has brought new confidence, and new prosperity, to our great capital. And the iconic stations at Old Oak Common, and, we must hope and expect, at Euston, will only reinforce that effect.

On the roads, the LTNs are now only a memory: to its credit, the Council listened to the pressures from civil society. But the cycling population grows and grows and grows, and the electric buses on the 65 route and beyond purr along, pointing to the future of urban transport.

Ten years ago, the cinema site was an embarrassing wasteland: now we have Filmworks, and the Ealing Pro-ject, and Dickens Yard, and many other developments along our roads and railways and canals, many of the driven by extraordinary Tony Pidgley, founder of the Berkeley Group, who came from nothing to change the face of modern London, mainly for the better.

And Tony Pidgley was one of those whose generosity helped us restore Pitzhanger Manor, and a build a proper Grade A Gallery, and a restaurant and a kiosk and much else. It was a huge collective effort, in which the whole community can take real pride.

Two footnotes: first, we faced a crisis when cautious Council officials wanted to "value engineer" out plans to restore, using drawings found in his home and museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, Sir John Soane's clerestory, an ingenious piece of engineering which provided natural light to the four servants' bedrooms at the top of the Manor. I was told I had ten days to find a quarter of a million pounds. And I did so, thanks to the foresight and generosity of the Chief Executive of Sky television in Isleworth, Jeremy (now Sir Jeremy) Darroch. Although he asked for nothing in return, I promised him we would call the rooflight the Skylight. Which we did. And it was the Darroch family who largely paid for the magnificent roofing over of the courtyard outside the Lodge at Pitzhanger, now known as the Hub, named after Lady (Rachel) Darroch, and winner of commendation from the Society in 2023.

The other footnote was HM The King's visit to Ealing, and to Pitzhanger, last December. In several different diplomatic jobs, including in Washington and Kabul, I had encountered the then Prince of Wales and his deep interest in architecture. I had briefed him on the project, and we had made plans for him to come, on his way out to Highgrove. But Covid intervened. Then, last November, out of the blue I got a call from one of his Private Secretaries: The King would be coming to a Christmas market in Ealing, on his way to Windsor, and had remembered that Pitzhanger was near the Broadway. Was a Royal visit feasible? Of course, it was, I replied: not just feasible, but essential.

It would be inconceivable for the King to come to Ealing, and not visit Pitzhanger. He came, and was delighted, not just by the beautifully restored building, but by the people he met: the crowds who pressed round him in the shopping centre, and dedicated craftsmen and women who had worked to put Pitzhanger back in the state John Soane would have wished.

And so, we now have Pitzhanger as the Jewel in Crown of a Queen of the Suburbs more confident, and less careworn, than she looked a decade ago.

In my Lecture in 2013, I debated the definition of a suburb, taking as my point of departure Michael Robbins's magisterial work on Middlesex. I concluded that the only robust definition of a suburb was an area of a city or town outside the centre.

The suburb is a facet of urbanisation: by mid-19th century every town with more than 50,000 inhabitants had its own suburb, for example Brighton and Hove – actually. When asked if I live in London, I am tempted to reply "Ealing – actually".

If we go back to the Middle Ages, London's suburbs were in part created by the City of London's refusal to incorporate them. To this day, the City has its own police force and own mayor. From 1580s a problem was posed by the rapid growth of the out parishes, leading initially to the creation of the City of Westminster.

In 1630s, the Aldermen of the City recorded that they had no wish to annex the "*turbulent and ever-growing suburbs"*.

In 1660, the Court of Common Council declared unanimously that:

> *"they conceived Incorporating the Suburbs of London distinct from the City to be destructive to the interests and trade of the City".*

The effects of that attitude are still seen today, in the government of London. But the City's stubbornness was the suburbs' gain. London never became a single city like Paris, but an organic coagulation of towns and villages. Our two-tier system of metropolitan government dates back to then.

The London County Council lasted from 1889 to 1965, and the Greater London Council only 21 years, from 1965 to 1986. Now we have the Greater London Assembly and a Mayor of London, who is more powerful than ever, and for which positions we will vote on 2 May.

Since 1600 there has been inexorable growth in London's suburbs.

By 1831 nine out of ten Londoners lived outside the City. But it was in last two thirds of the 19th century that things really began to change.

Until that time, Middlesex was mainly pasture, providing hay and grass for London's hundreds of thousands of horses, and, in the lower lands, market gardens to feed Londoners. The only significant towns in West Middlesex were Brentford – the river crossing for the main road to the west, and Uxbridge – a second river crossing, and the first stop for stagecoaches on the road to Oxford.

Along the Thames could be found a few villas and stately homes, and with the estates generally on the higher ground further from the river. Pitzhanger Manor and its park were an expression of Soane's desire to have a country place to entertain his guests, and to show off his treasures.

But perhaps the real drivers of change in Ealing were the arrival of God's Wonderful Railway – the Great Western - in 1837, then 40 years later the District and Metropolitan Railways, and early in the 20th century the London United Tramway.

But at first it was uneconomic to commute on the mainline railways. Nor were there many trains at the right time for working people. In the late 19th century, a London workman might earn 30 shillings a week, and expect to spend perhaps two shillings of that on travel.

In my inexpert view, however, the creation of the London suburbs was as much a matter of demand for decent private housing as much as supply of developed areas with transport links to the centre. The 19th century saw rapid growth in the middle class, with more and more office workers, and food for the city coming by rail from further out. The Victorian values of privacy and family life played their part in determining the pattern of settlement.

Ealing's population grew by 13% between 1841 and 1851, by 38% between 1851 and 1861, and by a staggering 91% from 1861 to 1871 (Acton's population grew by 164% over same period).

Ealing's first housing boom was from 1860. The second boom took place from 1875, when the Wood estate was developed, and the Great Western Railway doubled its track from two lines to four. The District Railway arrived here in 1879.

But it was the lack of working men's trains and of working-class housing that really affected the character of Ealing.

Between 1840 and 1865 there was not much suburban traffic on the mainline railway. But in the period 1865-80 there were adequate suburban services for middle class residents. And from 1880 onwards the arrival of the District Railway meant that working people could live in Ealing, and get to work in the centre of the city.

Another factor in Ealing's (and indeed London's) development is the connexion between what was previously parkland for a landed estate and low-density development. Somehow the developers built fewer houses, at lower density, and of greater quality, on former parkland. Ealing Park, with gardens designed by Repton and once a tourist destination, is an example of this. On other hand, the largely working-class areas of Chiswick and Acton were adjacent to the semi-industrial districts of Hammersmith.

So, by 1911 the parishes of Ealing, Hanwell and Acton combined had a population of 180,000 (and much larger if one counted in all wards of present borough). This compares with 338,000 for the larger new London Borough of Ealing in 2011, and perhaps 400,000 by 2031.

So, by 1931 topography of Ealing was essentially as it is today. The Queen of the Suburbs

Thus, in Ealing, there are fewer flats than the London average, but more terraced and semidetached properties. More housing here is owned and privately rented, fewer homes are socially rented, than the London average. Over last ten years, fewer residents of Ealing have been driving to work, but more have been taking the Underground, the Great Western, and now, supremely, the Elizabeth Line. The number of those cycling to work is increasing logarithmically – what is known active travel.

<u>Finally, the Natural Environment, which is what makes Ealing so special and so beautiful</u>

> "*Everywhere outside their houses are the citizens' gardens, side by side yet spacious and splendid and set about with trees. There are also in the northern suburbs of London splendid wells and springs with sweet healing, clean water… [where]… crowds of schoolboys and students and young men of the City take the air on summer evenings… the only plagues of London are the immoderate drinking of fools and the frequency of fires".*

Guess when that was written! 1880? 1780? In fact, it comes from William Fitz Stephen's *Preface to the Life of Thomas à Becket* of 1180.

The number of fires in the Borough may be down by as much as 40%. But, as Saturday night in the Broadway shows, the immoderate drinking of fools continues.

The key to the perfect suburb is balance: between work and life; between city and country; between retail and industry; between flats and houses.

In his *History of London*, Sheppard writes:

> "*the extent of [the suburbs'] dependence, like that of their supposed anonymity and sameness, can be overstated, for there was infinite variety in London's suburbs, arising from topographical situation, communications, the patterns of landownership, the timing of development, and the element of chance imposed by bankruptcy or death. Many late Victorian suburbs, moreover, clustered round ancient villages…, where numerous services had always been provided locally and where increasing demand naturally generated more local employment, regular travel between home and work for the suburban work force being nowhere near anything like universal and probably*

> *seldom if ever predominant. From such ancient nuclei many new suburbs inherited a measure of the traditional sense of identity of the place."*

Quite. Not *rus in urbe*, so much as *urbs in rure*. Ealing isn't Metro-land, and Metro-land isn't the suburbs.

And it's too easy to do down Metro-land, expressed in Ealing in the shape of Ealing Village and Brentham. Nicholas Taylor, writing in *The Village in the City,* criticised Geoffrey Spyer for saying in his *Architecture and Community* that in the great LCC cottage estates

> *"… improvements in living conditions were largely marginal [sic]…The enormous scale of their developments, their monotonous regularity and their meanness created a subhuman environment which was only relieved over the years by a few trees and bits of green."*

Taylor acidly observes: "It would be hard to invent a more total travesty of what the visitor today actually sees, in terms of blossoming gardens and mature woodland."

In the volume of their *Buildings of England* devoted to London Northwest, Pevsner and/or Cherry write of Ealing:

> *"The transformation of the village to a proud and successful Victorian suburb owed much to local surveyor and architect Charles Jones, who was responsible not only for the layout of the streets and their services but all the major civic buildings… Ealing is still a pleasant place, with enough remaining of the older houses and open spaces to give it a distinctive character, and plenty of well-cared-for Victorian suburbs".*

Michael Robbins says that the justification for the suburb is that "each man to be a full man needs a dwelling of his own, and some soil that is his to work on". This, he says, explains but does not excuse the forms it has taken. Ealing needs no such excuse.

We are lucky in Ealing. We have much to look back on, with pride. For example, when I delivered the Delafons Lecture 11 years ago, the Parks for People programme had not begun the magnificent transformation of Walpole and Lammas Parks. And we have much to which we can look forward with eager anticipation.

Michael Robbins's worries about lack of community just do not apply in Ealing with its vibrant communal life, of which this Civic Society is just one expression.

In the1960s, *New Society* carried articles about a flight <u>to</u> the green, from the cities to the country. In parts of America, there has been a flight <u>from</u> the green, back to the city centres.

In Ealing, we face no such dilemma. We are best placed to come through the middle – with a young and vibrant population, connected with London and the world, with no need to choose between city and country, both of which come together in our Borough.

I want to end, as I did in 2013, with John Betjeman's celebration of a corner of a very English county, Middlesex, with which I have fallen in love:

> *"Gentle Brent, I used to know you*
> *Wandering Wembley-wards at will,*
> *Now what change your waters show you*
> *In the meadowlands you fill!*
> *Recollect the elm-trees misty*
> *And the footpaths climbing twisty*
> *Under cedar-shaded palings,*
> *Low laburnum-leaned-on railings,*
> *Out of Northolt on and upward to the heights of Harrow hill.*

Parish of enormous hayfields
Perivale stood all alone,
And from Greenford scent of mayfields
Most enticingly was blown
Over market gardens tidy,
Taverns for the bona fide…"

Perhaps now some of us can repair to the many taverns round here for the *bona fide*.

I hope that the spirits of John Soane and Charles Jones will stand with us approvingly.

Done well, as in Ealing, the suburb is the Golden Mean of how and where modern men and women may live their lives. Here we find the perfect balance between city and country.