



Note of Meeting (2nd) – Thursday 23 August 2007

The Sale of the Manor of Rusthall

1. Purpose of the Meeting and Attendance

The first meeting on 14 August 2007 (special meeting of the Civic Society's Executive Committee) arose from the announcement (reported in The Courier 10.8.2007) that the Manor of Rusthall is to be put up for sale.

This second meeting was chaired by Jenny Blackburn (Friends of the Tunbridge Wells and Rusthall Commons). Philip Whitbourn represented the RTW Town Forum; John Cunningham and Roger Joye the Civic Society; Graham Bell and Geoff Butler the Pantiles Traders; George Lawson and others the Inner London Residents Association. David Wakefield was a Councillor for Culverden Ward. Rodney Stone (Clerk to the Commons' Conservators) was not present. Freehold tenants had not been invited.

2. Position of Participants

(a) Pantiles Traders

Graham Bell reported that the reaction of Pantiles Traders to the news about the sale of the Manor of Rusthall had varied. The traders had not formally registered as a body with CB Richard Ellis, but may think of doing so. It was noted that the Manor owned the Colonnade and the paving of the walks, as well as many of the buildings on The Pantiles. He wondered whether the South East Development Agency would wish to take an interest in the case, as they had contributed financially in the past.

(b) RTW Civic Society

John Cunningham reported that the position of the Civic Society was as follows (RTWCS Minutes 14.08.07):

- 1.) The involvement of RTWCS in any joint co-operation/activity with other amenity groups in TW, with a view to preserving the Commons for the good and benefit of the people of TW.
- 2.) That JC and RJ (subject to his agreement) should represent RTWCS on any Co-ordinating Committee and report back to the Executive Committee on all developments.
- 3.) That RTWCS was willing to provide up to £250 as 'seed-corn' to the establishment of the Co-ordinating Committee and its administration, on the assumption that other participating members would also contribute proportionately.
- 4.) That RTWCS agreed in principle to make a donation to any Public Appeal that the Co-ordinating Committee might deem desirable, but that the exact sum was a matter for further discussion by the Executive Committee.
- 5.) That the importance of proper legal analysis and advice was recognised, but that it was hoped that this could be obtained as an item of goodwill from informed sources locally.
- 6.) That it was anticipated following the meeting of the Co-ordinating Committee on 23rd August, that a meeting with TWBC would be arranged to establish what mutual ground existed and what mutual action could be started; and that the media would not be involved (if at all) until after this meeting.
- 7.) That, at the same time, approaches and discussions with CB RE and Christopher Hough and the Rusthall Manor estate would be undertaken, as appropriate, to clarify the situation and advance the views of the Co-ordinating Committee.

John Cunningham also mentioned that he had a son-in-law with property expertise, who had opined that CB Richard Ellis would clearly work for a single purchase if possible, and would only be likely to break down the estate if they were unsuccessful in finding a single buyer. However, he also thought that it would be worthwhile to contact a single purchaser if a ready-made partner for the purchase of part of the estate were to exist. Civic Society had registered with CB RE as an interested party. The impression was given that the main focus of the Society's interest was on the Common, rather than on The Pantiles.

(c) RTW Town Forum

Philip Whitbourn made it clear that there had so far been no opportunity for discussion of the matter at the Town Forum, which as yet had no formal position in the matter, beyond the Planning Committee requesting his attendance as well at the meeting on 14 August. He thought that the case could turn out to be a legal minefield and there was much about the Manor, both from a legal and a property point of view that was at present far from clear. He also reminded the meeting of the highly controversial road proposals that had been put forward for the A26 / A264 junction on the Common within living memory (c. 1996) and it could be a mixed blessing from that point of view. He recalled that the Civic Society had taken steps, following the Commons Registration Act of 1965, to try to get the Common registered and clarification of the Registration position at present was needed. He thought, too, that the focus should not just be on the Common, but on The Pantiles as well, although not necessarily from the point of view of acquiring buildings.

(d) Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

David Wakefield (Culverden Ward) said that the Leader of the Council, Roy Bullock, had seen CBRE with Robert Cottrill (TWBC Director of Planning and Development) and that there may be a Press Release of some sort forthcoming. However, Roy Bullock was now away and Robert Cottrill had been in London and thus unavailable for comment. David had sent an e-mail to Roy Bullock and was also in touch with Kent County Councillor John Davies, who represents Culverden, Rusthall, Speldhurst and Bidborough on the KCC.

3.) Conclusion

- (a) It was felt that exploratory meetings should be sought, first with TWBC, then with KCC to express the Group's disquiet at the possibility of an outside body acquiring the Commons and The Pantiles with the object of exploiting them.
- (b) That a full copy of the County of Kent Act 1981 should be obtained, together with any associated map. (This re-enacted provisions relating to the Commons originally contained in the 1890 Tunbridge Wells Improvement Act.)