

DEVELOPMENTS AT ASHTON COURT



The Society has recently made enquiries of the City Council concerning the work that is now planned for Ashton Court. It is well over thirty years since members of the Civic Society and of the Bristol Society of Architects took the initiative which eventually succeeded in persuading the city to secure the building, parts of which were in danger of collapse, and making it weatherproof. The outcome was that a substantial portion of the mansion was brought back into use but the money ran out long before the whole building could be fully restored.

In recent years new kitchens have been built in the area of the former Winter Garden and facilities have been provided in the stable area for educational purposes and for a cafeteria.

In the meantime two of the lodges have fallen into disrepair. The attractive lodge in Clarkencombe was vacated and the structure has remained unused with vandalism taking place resulting in the current very sorry situation. Ashton Park lodge has been unused for many years and is subject to vandalism.

Our representations and enquiries have therefore focused on bringing back more of the mansion into use, (particularly the Long Gallery on the South Front and the North West Wing to the left of the main entrance which includes the Billiards Room and the Library) and on the restoration of the two lodges. There are sums approaching four-and-a-half million pounds now available for this work deriving mainly from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

We have received a very full response from the Parks Service Manager, Mr. Peter Wilkinson. Since early 2003 the mansion has been operated in partnership with a private business, Sodexho Prestige. The arrangement is working well and producing a return for the city more than twice the

sum per annum attained when the council was sole operator. This income also has the advantage that, unlike the former situation, the profits can be accumulated and carried forward for the benefit of the mansion. By this means a level of investment has been secured which was not available previously. This should be sufficient for the maintenance of the mansion but there is no way that it will cover the cost of further significant restoration which will still require grant funding. This hoped-for Heritage Lottery Fund Grant will pay for **restoration of the Long Gallery** (the left-hand portion of the South Front) and this can be made revenue earning immediately on completion.

We have argued that the Billiards Room and Library Wing can similarly be made revenue earning almost independently from the rest of the house. Apparently the current funding will not stretch to this, as it is said that separate kitchens would be necessary. We are not completely convinced about this and believe that if the effort were made to restore this wing, even in part, it could be made revenue earning. At the same time we believe that the Fourteenth Century Medieval Hall immediately to the rear of the entrance hall ought to be freely available to the public on account of its character as the oldest portion of the whole building. It could be used as a cafeteria or such (as it was for a short time). To return this hall to public use would not cost a significant sum.

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