

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS of the Belsize Residents Association and the Belsize Society

This history of the fifth decade of the BRA/BelSoc supplements the story of the BRA prepared for our 40th anniversary in 2011.

During the period from 2011 to 2016, the Belsize Residents Association faced some exceptional challenges which raised questions about whether its status was appropriate to meet these demands. This resulted in a new Belsize Society taking over its role in 2019. But first, we will explore some of the challenges that the BRA faced in its fifth decade.

The period from 2011 saw major reductions in public sector funding which had a dramatic impact on local services. The long battle to keep Belsize Library as a council funded resource was lost in 2012 when it ceased to be part of Camden's Library Service. It was transferred to a local charity, The Winch, to run as a community resource. We are very grateful to them for keeping the library open and developing a range of community activities. In 2013 the battle to retain a local police station was lost when the Hampstead Police Station on Rosslyn Hill was closed. In 2014 the DfE purchased the building to provide premises for Abacus School which was set up to provide state school places for children in Belsize. They failed to get planning permission, so the building has remained empty. The Fire Station in Eton Avenue was decommissioned in 2014 and has been redeveloped as flats.



Diana Self (mainstay of the BRA over several decades) celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the BRA in 2011 with Averil Nottage (right, BRA chairwoman 2009-2014)

The proposal to run HS2 through Belsize raised planning issues of a scale that we had not previously experienced. Having responded to consultation in February 2014, we then petitioned Parliament about the effects of construction traffic, pollution and congestion

and the impact on the Adelaide Nature Reserve. The Chair appeared at a Parliamentary Select Committee hearing in December 2016 to speak to the petition. The combined pressure of Camden Council and local groups led to some important changes in HS2's plans. They agreed that spoil from work at Euston would be removed by train rather than trucks, causing less traffic and pollution. The BRA submitted a further petition to the House of Lords focused on ensuring that HS2 Ltd deliver on their commitments.

Alongside this, the BRA played a major part in opposing the planning application for a 24-story tower block at 100 Avenue Road. We made representations to the committee alongside other local bodies. We were delighted when Camden councillors turned down the application in September 2014. When the developers appealed, the BRA applied to be an interested party in the Inquiry and raised funds to pay for two expert witnesses, on heritage and open spaces, and a specialist barrister who presented our evidence in August 2015. The Secretary of State subsequently decided that affordable housing and other public benefits outweighed the harm that the development would cause to the Conservation area. In 2021 the developers applied to remove 36 affordable units from the development. We objected to this loss of public benefit and made written and oral presentations to the Inquiry.

In 2015 we applied for the Sir Richard Steele pub to be designated as an Asset of Community Value to stop the owner building flats above it and were party to their unsuccessful appeal in March 2016. Also in 2016, we objected to Transport for London's plans to remove the Swiss Cottage gyratory system linked to providing a cycling super-highway. TfL's plans were stopped in September 2018 when Westminster City Council won a Judicial Review. Over several years we have worked with Camden planners, and groups in other London boroughs, to try to improve local arrangements for managing construction after planning permission has been granted, particularly in relation to basements.

Throughout 2019 we monitored the air quality in Belsize, assisted by a team of 30 volunteers. It showed that in 3 of 10 sites the annual legal limits for nitrogen dioxide were breached and that several other areas experienced unacceptably high levels in winter.

The idea of planting new trees in Belsize is a recurring theme. We arranged for a ginkgo and a rowan tree to be planted in Belsize Village in 2010/11. In November 2020 another rowan tree was planted in St Peters church garden in memory of Consuelo Phelan, a committee member who was devoted to preserving the trees of Belsize and for 12 years checked every planning application relating to them. We didn't succeed in planting a tree for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012 but hope to do better for her Platinum Jubilee in 2022.

In 2016 the committee started to question whether the status of the BRA was appropriate for the scale of its activities, particularly because of the funding for professional advice in the 100 Avenue Road planning appeal. The BRA constitution, prepared in the early 1980s, also looked dated. The 2017 AGM agreed that a new Charitable Incorporated Organisation with members should be set up with trustees sharing corporate responsibility. New objectives were also accepted. The new Belsize Society was established and registered with the Charity Commission in November 2018. In March 2019 the AGM of the Belsize Residents Association transferred all its assets and activities to the new organisation and then wound itself up. This was followed by the first meeting of the Belsize Society.

We maintain communication with members through quarterly newsletters, and now also use emails for more urgent issues. Our members continue to keep us informed about the tradesmen they trust for our annual booklet *Tradesmen You Can Trust*. In 2012 we paid for a notice board in Haverstock Hill, as well as the one in Belsize Village. A smart new Belsize Society website was launched in 2019 sporting the new Belsize Society logo. It hosts the BRA archive.



St Stephens Church in 2012, scene of the BRA-sponsored viewing of David Percy's first Belsize Story film

At the summer garden party in 2011 we celebrated the BRA's 40th anniversary. Sadly in 2020 and 2021 our garden parties had to be cancelled for the first time in many decades because of Covid 19. Handley Stevens, and his band of musicians, led the festive Christmas carol singing in Belsize village until 2016, with Matthew Watts taking over from 2017. We hosted hustings for local elections in 2014 and 2018. The most popular event of the decade was when the BRA jointly sponsored a free viewing of the premier of David Percy's first Belsize Story film at St Stephens Church in March 2012. Although we had capacity for nearly 300 people, over 100 more had to be turned away. We also ran several successful historical walks, and one about the trees in the area. In November 2021 we will celebrate our 50th anniversary at Belsize Community Library after a presentation by David Percy about Moll King, the Harlot of Haverstock Hill.

We believe that the Belsize Society is now even better placed to promote conservation and sensitive development in this vibrant community