

Chairman's Report 2004/05

This year, SOAG has been busy protecting the Gardens from development.

Your Executive Committee has left no stone unturned in its efforts to prevent the sale of part of the gardens to allow the building of a block of flats. This activity has dominated the year and taken a great deal of our time. Despite that, we have also progressed the plan to introduce a programme of social activity, and undertaken some fundraising work.

We will soon be circulating the dates of the 2005/06 Executive Committee meetings to all members, and I would like to take this opportunity to remind everyone that any member of SOAG is welcome to attend any of the Executive Committee meetings, and to express their views on the items being debated. We have several non-committee members who attend, and we always welcome their contribution to the debates. Just put the dates in your diary and come along on the right days.

I would also like to remind members that only the postage costs prevent us from copying the minutes of the Executive Committee to all members, Any member wishing to receive the minutes of the Executive Committee can do so if they will bear the postage costs. Arrangements for this may be made with our Secretary.

It is my honour to thank the committee for the hard work they have done during the year. As someone said when they telephoned a message of support one evening, *"Those of us who cannot spare the time because we are bringing up young families or have work commitments, are very grateful there are people like you who will stand up and fight for the Gardens on our behalf, we owe you a huge debt of gratitude."* That lady was right. Without the work that has been done by our committee and volunteers, SOAG would not be the strong and healthy organisation it is today, the Ashton Institute would have been demolished, and part of the Gardens would already have been sold off.

Turning to our progress over the year, at our last AGM, I set out our intention which was: to support the lottery bid whilst opposing any sale of land in the Gardens; to strengthen our professionalism and raise our profile; to increase SOAG's future strength by growing the membership; to increase our social activity; and to progress the documentation of the original SAG campaign.

The Lottery Bid and Proposed Sale of Land

At the time of our last AGM, we were in discussion with Fylde Council, to see if a way could be found of bridging the gap that existed between us. We both supported the lottery bid, but the Council did not believe restoring the gardens was a high enough priority to use their cash reserves or borrowing to pay their part of the cost. They said they had higher priorities for this money,

and selling the land was essential to raise the 25% of the total restoration cost (the Lottery fund can pay the other 75%).

We came close to agreeing with the Council that a joint referendum held in St Annes should decide the matter. We proposed a referendum with a (written) vote offered to all St Annes residents. The Council were not able to agree. They planned to consult a selected sample of Fylde's residents, and said that in their view *"a referendum is a form of consultation which quite naturally the Council would have to lead."* Our agreement to this approach would have handed control of the process to the Council. We had envisaged it to be a partnership of equals. Furthermore, by consulting a selected sample rather than having a vote of all residents, we saw a risk that those doing the consulting might significantly influence the outcome. SOAG therefore ran its own written referendum of all 10,000 St Annes households using a voting paper delivered with the free Citizen newspaper.

Many thought our fears regarding the Council's planned consultation were justified when the Council subsequently published a question in the 'Express' asking: *"Do you agree to the sale of 0.6 per cent of Ashton Gardens in order to match fund a £2 million pound heritage restoration of the gardens"* and offered a choice of tick-box answers that were: 1) *"Yes I agree"* 2). *"No I do not agree to the sale, and would prefer the match funding to be included as a precept on my Council Tax bill of £X per year over a X year period (Amounts to be decided)"*, and 3). *"No strong feeling either way."* It was no surprise when just 133 people responded to the survey, and 77% of them answered "Yes" to such a loaded question.

This period was a difficult and emotive time for SOAG. Councillor Walton, one of the representatives of Ashton Ward, and Councillor Jealous of Fairhaven, both of whom had often supported SOAG in the past, now opposed our action, saying they supported selling this part of the gardens for flats. As a result, they left SOAG. Sadly, we also lost two members of our Executive Committee who felt SOAG should have been more accommodating to the Council.

Our referendum had asked the simple question *" Do you think any of Ashton Gardens should be sold, even if it is only a small part?"* Over 1,000 households completed voting papers, with 94% saying "No" to the sale. Despite its scale and findings, the Council ignored the result, and advertised the land for sale. Within a week, our volunteers had collected and sent the Council a copy of a petition with 3,844 signatures opposing the sale. Two weeks later we handed in a further 3,801 individually signed letters of objection. In all, just under 8,000 objections were received by the Council. They noted the objections, but disregarded the wishes of all these people.

Subsequently, when the nine Councillors (*John Coombes; Roger Small; Tim Ashton; Patricia Fieldhouse; Paul Hayhurst; Alfred Jealous; John Longstaff; Elizabeth Oades; and Paul Rigby*) made the decision to sell, and then later agreed terms of

sale in secret session, (including, we understand, granting the developer rights over other parts of the Gardens), SOAG reconsidered its position, and resolved to continue to oppose the land disposal by all lawful means.

Chief amongst these is our request to the Attorney General to have the gardens declared a charitable gift from Lord Ashton. We are hopeful of our case here. We believe the Borough Council should register the land with the Charities Commission. If this happens, it will be the Attorney General, and not the Borough Council, who will decide whether the land may be sold or not.

We also have two further initiatives that may frustrate development of flats on the land. At the time of writing it is not clear whether it will be necessary to invoke these measures.

Membership

In previous years, just prior to the AGM, membership has hovered around the 50 mark (2001 = 50, 2002 = 46, 2003 = 50). Last year we actively promoted membership and grew to 85 members. We now have 78, probably because we have not recruited as actively this year, having focused our energy elsewhere.

Fundraising

It has been a satisfactory year for fundraising. Despite a very wet Carnival day, our team of determined volunteers raised just coppers short of £600 (the same as last year when it was sunny!) Inevitably, we have incurred one-off costs for printing and delivering the 10,000 referendum forms, together with printing costs for the objections to the land disposal and so on. Time taken by these activities also meant we could not manage an autumn coffee morning. So, whilst our Treasurer will give the latest position, it is likely that overall, funds will be lower this year than last.

Social Activity

We did rather better in the earlier part of the year with social activity. We see this as an important way of building the collective strength of SOAG and of bringing new blood into the organisation, ensuring continuity and protection for the Gardens. Self-financing visits were made to, Myerscough College, Liverpool's Albert Dock, Salford Quays and the Lowry Centre. These visits bring closer contact with our members, and more are planned for this year.

Book

Early in the year, a start was made on the plan to tell the story of SOAG's genesis as a sort of modern day 'Canterbury Tales'. Two stories from people involved in the original march were recorded in the early part of the year, and more are in the pipeline. If members have a story to contribute, please let me know

Other Issues Of The Year

Our business this year has been dominated by the implications of the land disposal, but other issues have included:

- challenging the planning application submitted by Newfield Jones. SOAG member and retired architect Colin Barnes, found errors on the plan. Having these corrected has in part been responsible for delaying the full planning permission since November last;
- supporting the request for listing of the Empire Cinema/Plaza Bingo Club and Akeds Garage. We have also researched the early history of the Ashton Institute to support the request for its listing;
- maintaining contact with the St Annes Town Council Steering Group, members of which may well have a future role in the management of Ashton Gardens;
- beginning discussions with other groups who use the gardens, with a view to creating a user forum;
- welcoming Kath Bloch and David Meldrum to our committee. Both have regularly attended meetings as non committee members and, in accordance with our constitution, they were invited to fill the two committee vacancies that arose during the year.

The Year Ahead

The immediate future will see the conclusion of our claim that the Gardens should be registered as charitable land. It may also see the final stage of the planning application for flats.

We also expect the Council to request a lottery grant funded by the sale of part of the Gardens. In order to do this with any chance of success, they need to demonstrate that selling the land to pay for the lottery scheme has the support of the community. With strong and demonstrable community backing, SOAG opposes the sale, so it is likely the Council will try to create and lead an alternative, perhaps more compliant group, centred on Ashton Gardens. This may well include people drawn from a much wider catchment area than St Annes. We would not presume to insult the intelligence of the Attorney General and staff of the Heritage Lottery Fund in this way. Those bodies will be well aware of the volume of opposition the sale of the land has engendered, not least because of the 8,000 objections from the very community that the Council has just chosen to disregard.

So when people ask for your vote in the local elections later this year, you might like to remember those who disregarded your views, and ask why, having neglected the Gardens to the point that they now need to be restored, they do not regard them as a sufficiently high priority to restore them without destroying their integrity by selling part of them.

Fred Moor
Chairman