The Egyptian Halls, 84-100 Union Street, Glasgow

A National Scandal in Slow Motion
45 Years and counting!

The essence of propaganda is blaming others for what you caused yourself!

Now in 2025, the once independent heritage-centric stakeholders are under pressure, compromised, chasing reduced funding sources and resources!

Accountability and transparency are fragile, especially when truth is distorted!

Once upon a time, Heritage stakeholders were renowned for being fiercely independent, none more so than Alexander "Greek" Thomson's greatest champion, the late Professor Gavin Stamp.

The "Piloti" Legacy

See overleaf of his carefully worded praise and criticism, 1999-2019.

The Egyptian Halls Year 2000 Brilliant 100% Conservation Scheme Pages 3-5

Please read these ringing endorsements by

1) Letter to GCC DRS 12th November 1998

2) Letter to Historic Scotland 12th November 1998

3) Letter to John Addison - Structural Engineer 16th January 1999

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RECEIVED
20 JAN 1999

12th December, 1998

Rodger McConnell
Director
Physical and Economic Regeneration
Glasgow City Council
20, Trongate, G1 5EY

EGYPTIAN HALLS, UNION STREET

We are very glad to learn that the legal *impasse* which prevented the planned restoration of Egyptian Halls earlier this year is now likely to be resolved. Our understanding is that, having bought out Mr Dyer, Mr Derek Soutar of Dundee now owns 84% of the building and is in a position to proceed with the necessary work. We are also encouraged by having talked to Mr John Addison of Peter Stephen & Partners, consulting engineers, about the condition of the structure as we are relieved to be informed that it is perfectly stable and not in the parlous state as has sometimes been suggested.

I have read the reports by Peter Stephen & Partners and by the Morrison Partnership, architects, both dated October 29th, 1998, and am impressed by their cautious and respectful attitude to Thomson's building. Indeed, we applaud this conservative approach to the restoration of historic structures and the reluctance to do more than is necessary lest stability and integrity is undermined. Indeed, there were aspects of the earlier proposals for the rehabilitation of Egyptian Halls - particularly regarding strengthening the iron structure and stone-cleaning - with which we were not at all happy but which we supported if the only alternative was to be the loss of Thomson's extraordinary commercial masterpiece. We are therefore glad to find that, in the present proposals, the rear circular staircase is now to be retained and that the purpose of the so-called 'concrete' infill on each floor is now properly understood.

This letter is to record our support for the repair and stabilisation proposals made by Peter Stephen & Partners and the Morrison Partnership and to express the hope that, if they are adopted by the building's majority owner, they will receive the necessary consents and support so that work can proceed as soon as possible.

Gavin Stamp
Chairman

RECEIVED
20 JAN 1999

12th December, 1998

John R. Hume
Chief Inspector
Historic Scotland
Longmore House, Salisbury Place
Edinburgh EH9 1SH

EGYPTIAN HALLS, UNION STREET, GLASGOW

We are glad to learn that the legal *impasse* which prevented the planned restoration of Egyptian Halls earlier this year is now likely to be resolved. Our understanding is that, having bought out Mr Dyer, Mr Derek Soutar of Dundee now owns 84% of the building and is in a position to proceed with the necessary work. We are also encouraged by having talked to Mr John Addison of Peter Stephen & Partners, consulting engineers, about the condition of the structure as we are relieved to be informed that it is perfectly stable and not in the parlous state as has sometimes been suggested.

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Gavin Stamp
Chairman

THE ALEXANDER THOMSON SOCIETY

1 Moray Place, Strathbungo, Glasgow G41 2AQ
Telephone 041 423 3747

RECEIVED
6 JAN 1999

16th January, 1999

John D. Addison
Peter Stephen & Partners, Consulting Engineers
15, Annandale Street
Edinburgh EH7 4AW

Dear Mr Addison,

EGYPTIAN HALLS

Thank you for your letter of January 14th. I enclose copies of the letters I sent to the Council and to Historic Scotland a month ago.

And thank you for the reference to the Glasgow Herald article about the Gordon Street fire. I had forgotten that it was cited in Graham Law's article, but that must have sent me off to the Mitchell Library to find it.

Yes, do please keep me informed about developments with this project. The book of the Thomson Exhibition goes to press at the beginning of February, and it would be nice to say in the List of Works that the restoration of Egyptian Halls is about to proceed.

Yours sincerely,

Gavin Stamp
Chairman

THE PILOTI FILES
PRIVATE EYE
2000 - 2019

- Sept 2000 – praises GCC and TMP/Add Cons for effective collaboration - P 6

Private Eye : September 2000

NOOKS and CORNERS

THE Egyptian Halls in Glasgow has appeared in this column before. Built in 1870-72 and designed by a great architect, Alexander "Greek" Thomson, it is an exotic and extraordinary commercial block, inventive and yet practical.

A contemporary journal could even claim that "we doubt if its equal, for originality, grandeur of treatment, or imposing effect, could be found in any city, not excepting the metropolis itself." Needless to say, therefore, in recent years Egyptian Halls has been neglected, its survival threatened by decay and multiple ownership.

Since its last appearance (*Eye* 950), however, things have improved. For once the city council did the right thing and started compulsory purchase proceedings against the delinquent owner of the upper floors. Now, after legal wrangles, majority ownership has been

acquired by a Dundee developer, Derek Soutar, who has commissioned an admirable conservation report from good engineers and architects.

The resulting proposals for a conservative restoration of the whole structure — including the remarkable iron-framed interior — and putting it back into commercial use has the backing of Historic Scotland. But it is at this point, when the future of this building seems reasonably hopeful for the first time in decades, that Scottish Enterprise Glasgow has chosen to pull the plug and renege on a promise to give £250,000 in grant aid of public money.

It claims that to help this project "is not a priority… in terms of the Operating Plan 2000/2001" and "does not fit with any of the priorities for Scottish Enterprise National". Yet three years ago, when called the Glasgow Development Agency, this enterprise company, doling out public money from its plush city-centre offices, was prepared to support a more destructive rehabilitation scheme in the typical Glagow *macho* style. Indeed, it attempted to blackmail bodies like Historic Scotland into accepting a potentially destructive stone-cleaning of Thomson's extraordinary facade. Image is everything for the agency's sharp-suited spivs, after all, not long-term sustainability.

This decision seriously undermines the attempt to rescue this much-abused building. Yet if the rehabilitation and commercial use of a largely empty city-centre urban masterpiece by one of the two architects of international stature for which poor old Glasgow is famous is not to be regarded as of economic benefit to the city — as opposed to out-of-town American-style hypermarkets and business parks — then what on earth could be?

Would the agency now help with the restoration of a commercial building by Mackintosh? After all, one of the aims of Scottish Enterprise Glasgow is meant to be the "development, redevelopment and improvement of the environment". Are they hypocrites or fools — or are these flash executives just reflecting the modern Glasgow culture of loathing good architecture and old buildings?

***MY ATTENTION** has been drawn, as they say, to the new "authorised" biography of the late Sir Hugh Casson by José Manser in which this column's relentless persecution of that cuddly exemplar of English charm and shabby chic is condemned.*

My criticisms of Casson & Conder's Ismaeli Centre in South Kensington in 1982 (Eye 549) are even described as "bordering on racist in their venom". What I did, in fact, was to wonder how the Aga Khan, the plutocratic leader of a Muslim sect, should have so effortlessly acquired a site opposite the Victoria & Albert Museum once dedicated to the British people and intended for the National Theatre. I also suggested it was a mediocre, cliché-ridden design which, therefore, deserved the very first Sir Hugh Casson Medal. Was I wrong?

Perhaps Mrs Manser too much identifies her hero with her husband Michael who, as president of the RIBA and a knee-jerk modernist, has also been mentioned in this column. In her book, she declines to suggest any reasons for my "nastiness" towards Casson.

For the record, as I am "ever ready to be offensive", it was not just because I am repelled by charm masquerading as genius or public-spirited concern, but because Casson was shameless in the prostitution of his talents and connections. He used his status as a vice-chairman of the Victorian Society to oppose (for a fat fee) that society and others fighting at public inquiries for the preservation of, say, the Norman Shaw houses in Queen's Gate, Hounslow Town Hall and Liverpool Street Station. Later, he used his legendary charm to bugger up that great Elizabethan house, Sutton Place, without listed building consent.

De mortuis nil nisi bonum? Dear Sir Hugh "suffered with stoicism the abuse which was hurled at him" but I am told that being made a joke-figure in the Eye greatly hurt him towards the end of his life. Well, I cannot pretend that I am sorry. He also did much harm to the great city of Bath with the wretched "Casson mansard" roof, but I will admit that earlier in life, over the Festival of Britain, he did good things — which is more than can be said for his avid successors as public inquiry tarts, such as A. Blee.

'Piloti'

- Sept 2010 – criticises blinked and non-accountable bureaucracy - P7

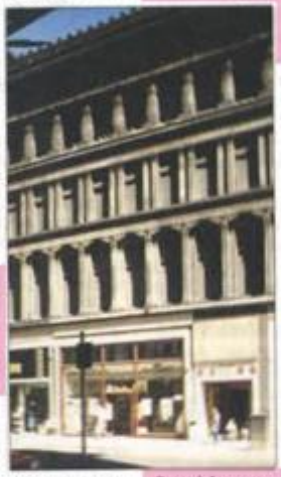
Private Eye : September 2010

NOOKS and CORNERS

EGYPTIAN Halls in Union Street, Glasgow, is one of the most astonishing buildings in a city full of great architecture (see *Eyes* 947, 950 & 1011).

Built in 1870-72 as a sort of department store-cum-exhibition gallery, it was designed by Alexander "Greek" Thomson, one of the two original architects of international stature for whose works Glasgow is celebrated (the other being St Charles Rennie Mackintosh).

The interior is a most unusual structure of cast and wrought iron and concrete; and the exterior facade a brilliant composition of Greek and early Classical elements which creates an effect of Old Testament grandeur. Thomson was responsible for other inventive commercial buildings in Glasgow, mostly now demolished; Egyptian Halls, his exotic commercial masterpiece, miraculously survives – just.



Neil Baxter, secretary of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, described it as "a building of the first importance, not simply in Glasgow or Scotland but in European terms". It is listed at the highest grade, "A". Yet this urban architectural wonder is now seriously threatened with destruction largely because of the blinkered bureaucratic obstructiveness of Historic Scotland, the Scottish government's heritage agency.

Thanks to former ownership by a Chinese restaurateur, Egyptian Halls has been in a sorry state for three decades. It has long lost the exotic cast-iron lamp standards that stood outside; the central doorcase has gone and the shop-fronts are inappropriate. Today the roof leaks, the interior is sodden, the iron is corroding and the stonework crumbling. The upper floors have long been empty; and now the tenants of the ground-floor shops have departed.

But there is a developer, Derek Souter, who, for the last decade, has wanted to restore the building and make it into an hotel. This makes commercial sense and would help revitalise Union Street. Historic Scotland, however, has been disinclined to engage seriously with Mr Souter and is now only prepared to offer a maximum £1.5m towards external stonework repairs – which suggests the quango does not understand the intimate dynamic relationship between the masonry front and the iron-framed interior.

Historic Scotland has questioned whether this Dundee developer's companies are "the right people to be delivering this project". Yet Mr Souter has hung on in for more than a decade and battled to buy out the other interests in the building at a cost of £5.5m. Union Street Properties now owns all the four ground-floor shops and Union Street Investments has all the upper floors.

Furthermore he has appointed highly qualified and reputable specialists. The consultant structural engineer is John Addison (who has been commissioned by Historic Scotland on other projects). And the architects, the Morrison Partnership, have prepared a design for restoration and conversion into a hotel which not only retains all the existing historic fabric but is entirely reversible.

Mr Souter would seem to have been transparent in his financial affairs and has been prepared to allow Union Street Investments to cross-subsidise the restoration of the ground-floor shops which are addled with inherited listed building repair notice costs. He argues that the money needed from central government now will soon be paid back through rates and the regeneration of Union Street.

Even Glasgow city council, whose treatment of historic buildings over the years has scarcely been edifying, agrees. Recognising its economic and tourism importance, it has offered £1m towards the project, and the economic convenor, Baillie Cameron, has stated that Egyptian Halls "is one of Glasgow's most important grade A listed buildings and is of real international significance. There is no doubt that it is a masterpiece of Victorian design and construction". The council has implored the Scottish government to cover the remaining shortfall of £1.35m on the £18m project.

Yet Historic Scotland and the Scottish government's Fiona Hyslop, minister for culture and external affairs, remain uncooperative and insist the refurbishment is "unviable". They have also now required the developer to take a strictly commercial view of the project, which has ruled out the cross-subsidy and greatly increased the financial shortfall. I note that the Heritage Lottery Fund in Scotland has recently offered a grant of £4.85m to develop the tourism potential of Sir Walter Scott's home, Abbotsford, although that famous historic house is not in danger of collapse. What explains this myopia? Is it just the snobbish prejudice of Edinburgh-based bureaucrats?

Unless there is real progress with the Egyptian Halls scheme very soon the hotel operator will pull out. The grant offer from Glasgow city council will also soon expire, as will the availability of the Business Premises Renovation Allowance. The opportunity of having the hotel ready in time for the Commonwealth Games will also be missed. If the hotel scheme fails, demolition of Thomson's decayed masterpiece may then be the only option. Is this what Historic Scotland wants? And is the Scottish National Party which runs Holyrood prepared to acquiesce in the destruction of one of the very greatest works of architecture in Scotland?

'Piloti'

- March 2011 – criticises Scot Govt for not funding Heritage/Regeneration - P8

Private Eye : March 2011

NOOKS and CORNERS

MORE from the ancient Royal Burgh of Dumfries in Scotland, the once proud and prosperous town which long ago erected "beautiful buildings of the red hewn sandstone".

I recently reported how Dumfries & Galloway council had abandoned support for the old Theatre Royal as having "no future". Earlier, there was the plan to demolish Moat Brae House, a Late Georgian mansion once the home of J.M. Barrie, by the Loreburn Housing Association with the connivance of the council, which also acquiesced in the stripping out of the town's Assembly Rooms as a bar (*Eye* 1243).

Now the housing association, notorious for the offensive mediocrity of the architecture it erects in place of fine historic buildings, has applied to demolish a pair of decent red sandstone houses, built by the sculptor William Flint, in St Mary's Street.

Along with the adjacent former Nithsdale Hotel of 1878, these houses are in an Outstanding Conservation Area. Historic Scotland considers them of architectural merit and that they contribute to the conservation area by maintaining the traditional street pattern and by forming part of the setting for St Mary's Church and Church Hall, both listed.

The houses were occupied until 2006 when the tenants were evicted by the housing association and Dumfries & Galloway council, which claimed that repairing and maintaining them was too expensive. The part of the site owned by the council was sold to the housing association in 2009. Loreburn now wants to replace the houses with blocks of new "social housing" faced in zinc cladding, render, brick and stone cladding – which will scarcely "enhance" the conservation area.

Needless to say the council has granted planning permission, claiming there was no interest in the buildings when placed on the open market in 2007. This is not true: Juliet Caird, a local landlord, offered a sum in excess of the asking price the following year, but the council withdrew the houses from the market.

Historic Scotland says there is no reason Nos 3-5 St Mary's Street could not be made back into dwelling houses and Nithsdale House converted into flats, while more flats could be built on the rest of the site. The demolition is strongly opposed locally and by the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland; and a petition has been sent to Fiona Hyslop MSP, Minister for Culture & External Affairs, asking for the case to be called in.

No hope there: Ms Hyslop, in her usual wet way, has declined to intervene, accepting Loreburn's pathetic claim that it is not possible to retain the existing buildings and that the social benefits to the council outweigh "historic environment issues". So the mendacious philistinism of Dumfries & Galloway Council triumphs again.

FIONA HYSLOP has already shown her uselessness in the tragic saga of Egyptian Halls in Glasgow (see below), an extraordinary iron-framed masonry commercial building in Union Street, built in 1870-72 and one of the most important few surviving works by Scotland's most intelligent and original 19th century architect, Alexander "Greek" Thomson.

Listed at Grade A, it has been neglected for more than 30 years and is now empty and in serious danger of collapse (Eyes passim). For the last 13 years Derek Souter, a developer from Dundee, has been trying to acquire and restore the building and convert it into an hotel. He claims his companies have already spent £5m on the project and are willing to invest a further £12m and possibly £14m. Even with grant aid from Glasgow and elsewhere, however, there is still a shortfall of £2.35m. So nothing happens, the fabric deteriorates further and the restoration costs rise.

Historic Scotland has only been prepared to offer £1.65m towards saving one of the most remarkable historic buildings in the country, arguing that it cannot offer more as this is a purely commercial project. Yet Ms Hyslop and the Scottish government are happy to give £4m towards a £10m tourism development project at Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott. Abbotsford House is of huge cultural significance, but it is not in danger of demolition or collapse. Also, restoring Egyptian Halls as a city-centre hotel and thus reviving Union Street, next to Central Station, will help the economy of Glasgow.

Mr Souter has had enough of the obduracy and prejudice of the Scottish bureaucracy and is now proposing an alternative new build scheme on the site for an 11-storey 200-bed hotel. This will be cheaper and quicker to achieve. In consequence, John Addison, the distinguished conservation engineer who has demonstrated how the original iron internal structure of Egyptian Halls can be saved and adapted, has resigned from the project. It is all very depressing.

Neil Baxter, secretary of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, now accuses Mr Souter of "trying to hold the Scottish Government to ransom" – scarcely fair considering how long he has battled, and how much he has spent on the project.

But what else is Mr Souter – and those who care about Glasgow's rare and precious architectural heritage – to do except try to shame the Scottish government into positive action? He has convened a public meeting to discuss the future of this real architectural wonder so there is hope yet.

'Piloti'

- June 2014 – criticises plans to remove Scaffolding, threatening Public Safety - P9

Private Eye : June 2014

NOOKS and CORNERS

ACCIDENTS will happen, though it helps if precautions are taken against them.

In the case of the fire that destroyed the West Wing of Glasgow School of Art, designed by C.R. Mackintosh, ignition came from expanding foam being placed on a hot projector in an installation being prepared for the degree show by a student in the department of sculpture and environmental art.

The fire destroyed the school's library *(pictured)* , an extraordinary and original interior of timber which was one of Mackintosh's last works and arguably his finest. The school says it will be recreated in replica – a course of action that, when carried out in a building like Uppark, the National Trust country house in West Sussex that was immaculately recreated internally after a fire, is normally condemned as dishonest "pastiche" by modernists, who advocate using the opportunity to create something new and "of our time".

Such is the fame and, all right, "iconic" status of Mackintosh's masterpiece that pastiche is now recommended. The architect John McAslan has argued that "it needs to be rebuilt exactly as it was – as authentically as possible... Perhaps the materials used will have to be weathered. What is built should not be perfect and clean."

Thanks to the efficiency of Glasgow's fire service, the blaze was contained. The school authorities are now upbeat, saying most of the structure and 70 percent of the contents survived; the lecture theatre was only partially damaged and the archives are safe. What the school is not saying is that the store room above the library was also destroyed. This contained paintings by Mackintosh's wife, Margaret Macdonald, as well as furniture. The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society says that more than a hundred pieces by Mackintosh are gone – as are all the rare books that were in the library.

Nor is the school saying that managers were repeatedly warned about the fire danger – the building was built like a traditional Glasgow tenement, with much timber – and strongly advised that only traditional painting and sculpture should be permitted within its walls.

If ranks are closing in Renfrew Street, there are still questions to be answered – and not only about why expanding foam was ever permitted in so precious a building. A rumour that a sprinkler system was not turned on was soon denied by a "spokesman": "There has never been a sprinkler system here because of the risk of water damage to fragile artefacts if it were activated in error."

This was a little economical. A high-pressure water mist system had at last received planning permission a year ago and was being installed. Why wasn't it made operational sooner? Part of the answer is that for the last few years all attention has been directed towards completing the £50m Reid Building on the opposite side of Renfrew Street.

This ugly pile is named not after the great local hero Jimmy Reid, as many Glaswegians supposed, but after Dame Seona Reid, until recently director of the School of Art who, as such, must take some responsibility for the management structure and culture that treated Mackintosh's building with such complacent negligence.

Designed by Steven Holl, the American superstar architect, the Reid Building, a concrete brute clad in green glass, with its internal "Driven Voids of Light", has none of the delicacy, thoughtfulness or true originality of Mackintosh's building (see *Eye* 1285). Indeed, while affecting to respond to Mackintosh, it actually looms over and overawes the School of Art.

It is the latest of many insults poor Toshie has had to endure over the years. But the fire, of course, is much worse. It was right that his most famous Glasgow creation was a working building and not treated as a sterile museum, but the fact is that, despite it being the School of Art's principal asset, much loved by the students who use it, and one that generated an income through tours, souvenirs and prestige, those in charge of it failed to look after it.

The School of Art is now short of space and the owners of the Egyptian Halls in Union Street have offered temporary accommodation in that neglected but solid building, though as yet have not received a response. Egyptian Halls is, of course, one of the last surviving works by Glasgow's other supremely original Victorian architect of international stature, Alexander "Greek" Thomson (*Eyes passim*). Neil Baxter, secretary of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, has rightly described it as "a building of the first importance, not simply in Glasgow or Scotland but in European terms" It is also listed at Grade A. But whereas the governments in London and Edinburgh have been quick to offer unlimited sums to restore Mackintosh's masterpiece (is there a referendum soon, by any chance?), Egyptian Halls is in danger and receiving no help from Historic Scotland or Glasgow council, whose latest move is to threaten to enforce the removal of the specially designed protective scaffolding which has prevented any further deterioration of Thomson's exotic commercial masterpiece over the last few years.

"Do we need to get a fire going as well?" wonders the conservation engineer who is trying to preserve this extraordinary and precious Glasgow building – but then realises that Egyptian Halls won't burn, "by virtue of good design."

'Piloti'

- July 2014 – contrasts continuing decay compared to favourable GSA treatment - P10

Private Eye : June 2014

NOOKS and CORNERS

BRIGHTON, aka London-on-Sea, is full of wonderful things, not least the exotic Royal Pavilion. But it has long had a local authority that has failed to protect what makes the place special.

Many interesting buildings have been allowed to go; and perhaps the rot started when the Regent Cinema, a remarkable building with wonderful interiors, came down in 1974. It had been closed by the Rank Organisation, which had decided to concentrate on the old Brighton Hippodrome. And now the Hippodrome itself, a theatrical building of extraordinary interest with a huge circular interior, is itself under threat.

The Brighton Hippodrome (*pictured*), tucked away near the Lanes and the seafront, began life in 1897 as an ice rink. Three years later it was partially rebuilt as a circus and a theatre by Frank Matcham, the *doyen* of theatre architects, who gave it a richly decorated interior with balconies and a wonderful wide dome. For many decades after it reopened in 1902 the Hippodrome was the principal theatrical venue in Brighton. Sarah Bernhardt, Buster Keaton and Laurel & Hardy performed there, not to mention the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In 1965 the theatre closed and, after a spell as a TV and film studio, it was bought in 1967 by the Rank Organisation and turned into a Mecca bingo hall. Bingo ceased in 2007, since when the building has not been used.

Now the Hippodrome has been acquired by Alaska Development Consultants, who claim (without evidence) that it is in danger of collapse. They hope to make it into a "new entertainment hub". With architects Russ Drage they propose a "restoration" which entails dividing up the interior as an eight-screen cinema, leaving the space under the dome as a restaurant. This scheme was strongly opposed by the Theatres Trust, which pointed out that the Hippodrome is the only surviving circus theatre in the country, that its interior, by Matcham, is significant both nationally and internationally, and that no other grade II*-listed theatre has been allowed to be divided in this way. The developers claim everything proposed will be reversible; but as the theatre historian John Earl observes: "So it is, if you believe an omelette can be returned to its component eggs."

There is no reason the Hippodrome cannot be a theatre again. What Brighton lacks is a lyric theatre. Yes, it has the Brighton Centre, and the Theatre Royal, now run by the Ambassador Theatre Group, which is interested in operating the Hippodrome if it were restored. There is also the Dome, the Oriental-style former stables to the Royal Pavilion, but it has no fly-tower and so cannot receive major musicals – which a restored Hippodrome could. But Brighton and Hove council seems determined the Hippodrome will never be a theatre again. One officer stated that because it has been empty for some time it can have no future. This, the Frank Matcham Society points out, shows great ignorance of theatre history: the London Coliseum (also by "Matchless Matcham") was for many years a cinema before becoming home to English National Opera.

At a planning meeting last month, Alaska's destructive scheme was approved, even though there is another eight-screen multiplex close by, along with hundreds of restaurants and bars. Much was made of the lack of opposition from English Heritage; but the planning committee was not told that, in its letter, EH did not rule out the possibility "that a theatre use, in a repaired building, could be a viable business in Brighton" and "would be pleased to consider an alternative… proposal". As the council knows, the strongly supported Our Brighton Hippodrome campaign plans to submit just such a proposal.

The Theatres Trust has asked for this case to be called in. Given that the Hippodrome is listed II* and could be very important, if restored, to Brighton's economy, the secretary of state must surely take notice. To his credit, Eric Pickles did the right thing over Smithfield Market. He is now the only hope to stop this extraordinary building being mutilated and abused.

CHANCELLOR George Osborne recently announced that £5m is to be given to the Glasgow School of Art towards building a new Graduate & Research Centre. This is in addition to the £5m promised to recreate C.R. Mackintosh's Library in the West Wing gutted by fire in May.

Obviously such largesse has nothing to do with the forthcoming referendum on Scottish independence. But it seems strange further to reward the GSA when it was the indolence and incompetence of its managers which was responsible for the fire, combined with the fact that it was the completion of the school's new (dreadful) £50m (not-the-Jimmy) Reid Building opposite which distracted them from completing the fire protection system in the original Mackintosh building (for which they were given £250,000 in 2012 – see Eyes 1368 & 1369).

Alongside Toshie, Glasgow has had other brilliant architects of international stature, above all Alexander "Greek" Thomson, whose commercial masterpiece, Egyptian Halls, continues to decay, partly because help is lacking from Glasgow city council and Historic Scotland. That public money should now go to the GSA and not to revive a building by Thomson of supreme cultural and intellectual value is wrong and stupid.

'Piloti'

- ???? 2016 – details GCC plans to remove Scaffolding, but no idea to solve funding impasse created by public sector errors and mistakes - P11

Private Eye : ????? 2016

NOOKS and CORNERS

AS THIS column has often noted, some of the worst vandals are educational institutions, ostensibly committed to civilised values but which, confident of their own righteousness, coesider that their own needs transcend all others.

Framlingham College (formerly The Albert Middle-Class College in Suffolk) has long owned – and neglected – a once-charming weatherboarded cottage on its estate known as The White Cottage. It has now applied to demolish it and replace it with a pair of semi-detached houses in a similar style. The cottage is not listed, English Heritage having recently declined to spot list it, arguing that it dates from

1840 and has been too much altered, when in fact its timber-frame is late 18th century. But it stands in the Framlingham conservation area, whose 2013 appraisal by Suffolk Coastal district council notes that it is the "only example of a completely weatherboarded dwelling in the entire conservation area... the building makes a very important contribution to the character of the conservation area."

Paul Taylor, headmaster, has stated: "The college has been acutely aware of the poor state of the White Cottage for a number of years and, as we have been advised it is beyond repair, we intend to demolish it." But if it is in poor repair, this is due to neglect by Framlingham College; and conservation engineers at the distinguished Morton Partnership believe restoration is possible and would be cheaper than demolition and rebuilding.

Local opinion is split. There is a petition against demolition, but Framlingham town council seems in favour, no doubt reluctant to offend the college. The Georgian Group has objected, but the Suffolk Preservation Society does not seem much concerned (it is coincidental that its chairman, a former vice-chairman of English Heritage, happens to be chairman of the school governors).

Framlingham College has a large estate so there is no pressing need to demolish this poor little cottage. Eighty or so years ago its hard red Victorian Gothic building would have been regarded as hideous and expendable and the cottage more worthwhile. Today, of course, we should be able to see that both matter and both have charm. English Heritage, now Historic England, should look again at the White Cottage: it merits listing. And cherishing.

THE Egyptian Halls in Union Street, Glasgow, by contrast, is a really major building – one of the finest creations of Alexander "Greek" Thomson and listed at grade A. Although in the centre of the city, it has been closed and decaying for decades.

The story is complicated (Eyes passim ad nauseam); but the nub is that neither Historic Scotland nor Glasgow city council seems willing to enter into a public-private partnership with the majority owner and developer, Derek Souter, which – given the costs – is the only way to restore and regenerate the building. When the Library of C.R. Mackintosh's School of Art went up in flames, both public bodies were quick to throw millions at its restoration. Why don't they also care about Egyptian Halls, the commercial masterpiece of one of the most original talents and greatest minds in Scottish architecture?

At present Egyptian Halls is concealed by protective scaffolding and hoardings. But the council's development and regeneration department has now ordered that the scaffolding be replaced by netting because "public realm improvements" are scheduled for Union Street.

If the council really cared about the public realm, it would surely pursue the long-overdue restoration of Thomson's masterpiece. The architect for the restoration, George Morrison, has warned: "John Addison [conservation engineer] and I want to, yet again, put on record that we will not be party to any decision that results in the removal of the protective scaffold. The risks resulting from its removal are real and significant... In practical terms alone it is not an appropriate or viable solution. It is reasonable to imagine that these suggestions are for reasons not directly related to the well being of The Egyptian Halls or its proximity to the public."

Will nobody in the Scottish government bang heads together and get a full restoration going before it is too late?

● MORE on the promises of Jamie Brown, the "multi-millionaire" owner of the Bishop's Palace at St Columb Major in Cornwall, to restore the listed building which is in urgent need of repair. Mr Brown, alas, now has other things on his mind and will be appearing at Blackfriars crown court on 14 March accused of illegal possession of a firearm – a charge which he strenuously denies.

Surely, given Mr Brown's current legal travails and the very poor state of this important building, it is now time for Cornwall council to act in the public interest and use the powers it has to rescue the Early Victorian Gothic mansion? After all, there is a sense in which listed buildings belong to the whole nation. Or will this spineless local authority argue that to compulsorily purchase the house while the owner is, ahem, temporarily distracted, is to deny him his human rights? Watch this space.

'Piloti'

"I've nothing against foreign workers if they've got specialist skills and pay their taxes"

- Feb 2017 – criticises GCC for “masterly inactivity”- P12

Private Eye : February 2017

NOOKS and CORNERS

THE Glasgow School of Art on Garnethill, towering above Sauchiehall Street, is famous. When its custodians, through culpable incompetence, allowed it to go on fire three years ago so that the library – the masterpiece of its architect, Charles Rennie Mackintosh – was destroyed, Glasgow city council and the world rallied round, promising money to restore it (*Eye* 1368).

Extraordinary, therefore, that there should now be a redevelopment scheme for Sauchiehall Street which will adversely affect the setting of this grade A-listed building. This was first mooted and put in for planning permission last year. I did not write about it then as I could not believe that so bad and damaging a proposal could be taken seriously. But it has been, and it remains a threat. In fact, the scheme has got worse.

The proposal is to replace the building in Sauchiehall Street which was lately Jumpin' Jaks night club, a long structure of 1965-67 faced in brown brick, which has the one merit of maintaining the four-storey height of its early 20th century neighbours. This is to be replaced by the developer Urban Pulse with a 185-bed block of student accommodation designed by HAUS architects.

This design would be merely banal if it did not rise from (an already excessive) five storeys to six on the corner of Dalhousie Street and then step up to eight storeys as it climbs up the steep hill to the east wing of the School of Art. The effect is largely to obscure the view of the rear, south-facing elevation of Mackintosh's building – an extraordinary, thrilling design which would seem to be a romantic, abstracted version of Fyvie Castle.

The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society has of course strenuously objected to this proposal, as has every other amenity society in Glasgow and beyond. What is extraordinary, however, is that Historic Environment Scotland – which claims to be "the lead public body set up to investigate, care for and promote Scotland's historic environment" – is NOT opposing redevelopment, thus confirming its reputation in both Edinburgh and Glasgow for being feeble and accommodating to both money and government.

"It is unclear from the drawings what the exact physical impact on the adjacent buildings will be," is Historic Scotland's useless response. "But, following pre-application discussions, we understand that it will directly affect the Grade C-listed 304-332 Sauchiehall Street, and not Glasgow School of Art. If there are direct physical impacts on Glasgow School of Art that require listed building consent, [the] council will need to re-consult us with a set of detailed drawings that show what that impact will be."

Well, we trust they will. But what *is* the council's attitude? Having done its best to allow demolition of Mackintosh's legacy back in the 1970s, it now regards the Mackintosh Industry as a cash cow for Glasgow, essential for tourism. Toshie's 150th birthday falls next year, and his famous Willow Tea Rooms is, happily, to get a £10m revamp, so surely the council will turn down a bad, overweening scheme that will damage the setting of the School of Art? We shall see. There is no reason to suppose that the councillors really care about the city's historic buildings.

As Nigel Dewar Gibb wrote to *The Herald* last month: "How tragic that our other world-famous architect, Alexander 'Greek' Thomson, will by comparison apparently go unnoticed in his bi-centenary year this year", pointing out that Thomson's St Vincent Street Church – owned by the city – "is now in great need of respect and attention and greater promotion by the city council along with Thomson's many other striking buildings [which] deserve, but do not receive, the same level of recognition and praise as those of Mackintosh..."

Above all, there is Egyptian Halls in Union Street, Thomson's finest and most extraordinary commercial building, which – very much thanks to masterly inactivity by Glasgow city council and Historic Scotland – is empty, derelict, rotting and in severe danger; a standing reproach to Glasgow's complacent reputation as a former City of Culture.

No solution to the problem of Egyptian Halls is on the horizon, even in the 200th anniversary year of the birth of its architect: one of Scotland's greatest. Yet the council has managed to find £250,000 to put towards restoration of the Willow Tea Rooms. One begins to despair...

- June 2017 – reinforces lack of cohesion from Scot Govt relating to combined Heritage/Regeneration - P13

NOOKS and CORNERS

THE former Royal High School continues to sit proudly, unsullied but empty, on Calton Hill in Edinburgh – for the moment.

It could have been the home of the Scottish parliament until the late Donald Dewar decided otherwise. One of the finest monuments of the Greek Revival in Europe – Alexander "Greek" Thomson thought it one of the "two finest buildings in the kingdom" (by which he meant the United Kingdom) – it is a visible symbol of the Scottish Enlightenment and of the values that once made Scotland great. But it remains under threat.

The truly barbarous scheme by the firm of the late Gareth Hoskins to make it into a luxury hotel for the Rosewood Group by mutilating Thomas Hamilton's masterpiece and covering the adjacent hillsides with new extensions (see *Eyes* 1386, 1388 & 1401) may have been (narrowly) rejected for planning permission and listed building consent because of its scale, but the developers have not given up.

Duddingston House Properties has now put forward a revised scheme in which the new buildings are smaller and set further back from the road, but the general effect is the same. The proposed new blocks, largely of glass, with curved walls, remain discordant and will spoil Calton Hill – Edinburgh's Acropolis – and the setting of the High School.

Converting that noble building into a hotel remains inappropriate; and the plan is again vigorously opposed by the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland, among others. Spoiling both the High School and Calton Hill seems particularly monstrous when there is a more appropriate and civilised fully-funded scheme on offer: the proposal by the Royal High School Preservation Trust to make the building the new home of St Mary's Music School, which already has planning permission and listed building consent.

The problem is that Duddingston House Properties has a prior claim on the site, so if the revised hotel plan wins permission it will take precedence. Thus will the fate of one of Scotland's finest buildings be decided. What will Historic Scotland advise and Edinburgh city council decide?

Given their respective records, there must be cause for concern, especially as Edinburgh now seems in thrall to commercial interests. First minister Nicola Sturgeon, keen to boost Scotland's sluggish economy, has set up a Growth Commission, on which two property developers sit. It is chaired by the former SNP MSP Andrew Wilson, a professional corporate lobbyist who seems to have little time for the economic as well as the social benefits of the conservation and adaptation of historic buildings.

Will the old High School continue to represent the ideals of the Scottish Enlightenment? Or, converted into a mere hotel, will it simply come to demonstrate that property developers now call the shots in the Athens of the North? Watch this space…

THE fate of another old Edinburgh building suggests the latter.

The Royal Hospital for Sick Children is moving to new buildings in Little France, leaving its old home in Sciennes Road by the Meadows empty and up for grabs. This was designed in 1892 by George Washington Browne in a Jacobean style, and was embellished by having murals by the celebrated Phoebe Traquair in the mortuary chapel.

Shortly before Christmas the sale of the old hospital building was announced by the property agent Rydens, acting for NHS Lothian and NHS Scotland. A bid was then entered by

Summerhall and Oesselmann Estates Ltd; that is, by Robert McDowell who, six years ago, converted the former Royal (Dick) Veterinary College into Summerhall, a centre for the arts, research and education which now serves as a venue for the Fringe during the Edinburgh Festival.

Mr McDowell's vision was to restore and convert the old "Sick Kids" hospital to make The Meadows: a Centre for Arts and Creative Industry, equipping it with theatre spaces as well as a library for the arts and sciences. In his bid, he noted that "Summerhall serves the foundation purpose of The Edinburgh Festival: 'To heal the wounds of war through the languages of the arts.' In the festival's 70th anniversary year we hope to announce a museum to its history and an international gallery dedicated to children's art, which we would create within RHSC."

He also observed that "distinctive buildings designed for public service… should be for public use, because they delivered highly esteemed, widely loved, service to the public for over a century." Quite.

Earlier this month Robert McDowell was told by Rydens that, despite his track record and the evident success of Summerhall, his bid would not be taken to the next stage of the process. No explanation was given.

No doubt it will be announced in due course that the successful bidder is a property developer who will convert the old hospital into expensive flats (pity about the murals). So much for the public realm; so much for the economic benefit that the arts and the Festival bring to Scotland's capital. A stitch-up between property agents, property developers and the banks? In Edinburgh? Surely not?

'Piloti'

"At last! Attractive wind turbines!"

Letters

Wails from Wales

Sir,

It may have escaped the attention of your correspondent (Robin Llywelyn, Eye 1439) that libraries, public conveniences, social care for the elderly and many other services funded from the public purse are being severely cut, whilst official documents in Wales are still being produced bilingually at inordinate expense. I often wonder how many people in Wales don't understand English but I could probably count them on the fingers of one hand. Nothing will persuade me that Welsh is a more useful language in which to receive education than English, wherever you live in Wales.

I have every respect for Welsh language and culture, but not at my expense as a taxpayer, and I am glad my children did not have traditional Welsh-medium education forced on them to their inevitable detriment. Regarding those who object to this development, your aforementioned correspondent exhibits a type of small-minded bigotry similar to that of which he complains.

DAVID HOWARD.

Hay on Wye, Powys.

…How disappointing that Robin Llywelyn should choose name calling and political tarring to make his case for Welsh-medium schooling ("Welsh lessons", Letters, Eye 1439).

It is the duty of local authorities to provide the best education for our children. Our community in and around Llangennech has a typically modern mix of families speaking Welsh, English and a variety of other languages. The dual stream at Llangennech served us well with an ability to make a choice based on the best interests of the children.

Welsh is a beautiful language and I am proud that both my children can speak it thanks to the teachers in Llangennech. It is with great sadness that I watch a fine village school being used as a political football (or should that be rugby ball) by people more interested in ideology than local opinion and the education of children. Trying to create a "united Welsh-medium community school" by dividing the community is as daft as it sounds.

LINCOLN GROVE.

Court out

Sir,

I was astonished to read that Charles Taylor has managed to remain active on the Liberian political scene via the use of a landline in HMP Frankland, County Durham (Phone a Fiend, Eye 1438). I ought to point out, however, that his 50-year sentence for war crimes and crimes against humanity was handed down by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, not by the International Criminal Court. Like Taylor, I spend a great deal of time indoors.

DR JAMIE TRINIDAD,

Wolfson College, Cambridge.

Missing Lincs

Sir,

Re Fat of the Land (Eye 1438): The "PE" postcode of Burghley House does indeed denote Peterborough in Cambridgeshire, but the house itself is over the border in Lincolnshire, where it's been for hundreds of years.

STUART PEARCEY,

Scunthorpe.

- March 2018 – criticises broken promises to part-fund fund known deficit by GCC-Scot Govt - P14

Private Eye : March 2018

NOOKS and CORNERS

SUNDAY 9 April will mark the 200th birthday of one of the most original and intriguing British architects, one of the greatest minds in Scottish architecture and one of the two designers from Glasgow who are acclaimed for their international importance: Alexander "Greek" Thomson.

So is Glasgow celebrating the bicentenary? No. And nor is the Scottish government in Edinburgh. In fact, Glasgow city council and Historic Scotland are doing worse than nothing as they are both content to respond to the continuing decay and neglect of Thomson's finest and most extraordinary commercial building, Egyptian Halls (now reaching crisis point), shown right, with complacent inactivity.

I make no apology for banging on about Thomson and Scotland again (*Eyes* 947 & *passim ad nauseam*) as we still live (for now) in a United Kingdom, and Egyptian Halls is a building of which Glasgow (and Great Britain) ought to be proud; one which deserves to be as famous and cherished as the School of Art designed by that other great Glaswegian talent, C.R. Mackintosh.

It was built in Union Street 1870-72 as a sort of department store and exhibition gallery, complete with a progressive amenity, a "ladies' lavatory and retiring room". The façade is an extraordinary composition of exotic architectural elements which defied classical convention and logic, and employed large sheets of glass in a very inventive manner; behind, the interior was largely of iron construction. One contemporary (London) critic wrote that Egyptian Halls was: "Probably the architect's most successful effort, and we doubt if its equal, for originality, grandeur of treatment, or imposing effect, could be found in any city, not excepting the metropolis itself."

Today Thomson's façade cannot be seen as it is covered in scaffolding and hoardings, despite the fact the building stands in a handsome Victorian street in the heart of the city, next to Central Station.

Egyptian Halls has been in a dreadful state for decades, caused by problems of multiple ownership and indifference. The story is complicated. The salient points are that Glasgow council did the right thing in 1996 and imposed a compulsory purchase order (CPO), with the eventual result that by 2008 the whole building was acquired by Derek Souter, a developer based in Dundee.

Mr Souter has devised a perfectly sensible scheme (costed at £18m last year) to have shops on the ground floor and to convert the upper floors into a hotel. He has a hotel operator on board, has hired good architects, the Morrison Partnership, and gone to one of the best conservation engineers in Scotland, John Addison, who has an impressive record saving important historic buildings.

But there seems to be antipathy to Mr Souter in Glasgow and Edinburgh, even though he has not thrown in the sponge and given up his dream of restoring Egyptian Halls and, despite rebuffs and setbacks, will not go away and is still prepared to spend a great deal of his own money on the project.

There is much about all this I confess I do not understand, not least the obscure distinction between Mr Souter's various companies – Union Street Properties, Union Street Investments, etc – which seem to have different interests in the building. When it comes to his claim that, because of an amendment to the CPO which is legally irreversible (and which was kept secret for 16 years), the council is responsible for the considerable rise in costs due to endless delay, I am out of my depth. But it is clear the council has and continues to place obstacles in his way. Why? Especially when restoration of Egyptian Halls is the key to the regeneration of Union Street.

Mr Souter seems to be the only person or concern willing to take on Egyptian Halls, but to do this he needs help – not unreasonably when dealing with a famous category A-listed building. Glasgow once offered a grant of £1m, and Historic Scotland £1.65m, toward restoration; but there is still a shortfall of more than £4m, so nothing happens and Egyptian Halls continues to decay.

Yet the city seems almost eager to throw public money at any building by Mackintosh while the Scottish government found £4m for Abbotsford House, the home of Sir Walter Scott, which was not falling down. Perhaps this is not surprising, seeing how much of Scottish tradition and identity was invented by Sir Walter, but surely a major work by "Greek" Thomson – one in severe danger – should also be important to Scottish culture.

Is there no one in the Scottish government who can bang heads together and get things moving in this bicentenary year? In fact, is there anyone in Holyrood who cares about the art of architecture in which Scots have excelled? Possibly not. But others do. "There is no question that the Egyptian Halls is the finest surviving example of an Alexander Thomson commercial building," Neil Baxter, secretary and treasurer of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, said recently. It is "of the first international importance and it would be a great pity if lack of a relatively small amount of money, in terms of public expenditure, condemned this building."

Next year sees Toshie's 150th birthday. No doubt it will be celebrated by Glasgow city council with much self-congratulatory fanfare.

'Piloti'

Letters

Osborne off-message

Sir,

Re your cover of issue 1440 – George Osborne announced as editor of the Evening Standard while standing in front of a TV showing an excerpt from the Tory party conference proclaiming "Our objective is to build a fairer society, where success is based on merit and not privilege." Shome mishtake, shurely?

DUNCAN SIMON.

Article of faith

Sir,

Re Number Crunching (p10, Eye 1440): the difficulty of getting the 1993 Maastricht legislation through parliament, contrasted with the ease of triggering of Article 50, may have something to do with the fact that the former gave away UK sovereignty with no democratic mandate, while the latter is getting it back – with a democratic mandate.

NIGEL FARR-WRIGHT,
(aka Simon Copley).

Safety lesson

Sir,

"Dr B Ching" is correct that the RMT has a weak argument on safety in opposing DOO trains for Merseyrail (Signal Failures, Eye 1440). But rail unions have a long history of Luddite opposition to anything new.

Interestingly, the procedure for guards closing doors on Merseyrail does not help safety in the examples described. The guard closes passenger doors, steps into his/her compartment, closes the door and signals the driver to leave. So at that point the guard is inside the train unable to see anything happening as the train moves. With DOO, as the train starts the driver can look at the CCTV or mirror to make sure nothing untoward is happening. I disagree with the Dr that drivers cannot do this. So the RMT is actually opposing something which is safer.

ALISTAIR STUART,
Liverpool.

Friendly fire?

Sir,

Your correspondent ("A police officer writes", Letters, Eye 1436) and the respondent, (Letters, Eye 1440 "Black Lives do matter") along with other readers may wish to read New York City's review of police "Blue on Blue" shootings commissioned after two black officers were shot dead by colleagues (www.hks.harvard.edu/criminal/justice-backup/publications/Police-on-Police_Shootings.pdf).

It may well be that attacks on officers have been launched by some claiming to support "Black Lives Matters", but the body count of black and Hispanic officers is higher at the hands of their colleagues, of all ethnicities. If you read the whole report, you will find how a white officer responding whilst distributing Christmas presents to children ended up shooting and seriously wounding a black officer whilst still dressed as Santa Claus. The black officer was in uniform.

MIKE WINNEY,
Swindon.

- March 2019 – Highlights CPO failure consequences, GCC denies any impropriety, but has admitted a known but non-disclosed contract breach - P15

Private Eye : March 2019

NOOKS and CORNERS

THE former Majestic Cinema, in the Mapperley suburb of Nottingham, designed by architect Alfred Thraves in the 1920s, faces demolition just as it has started showing films again for the first time in more than 50 years.

Nottingham-based Thraves was one of the leading cinema architects of his day, but very few of his large single-screen buildings of the 1920s, with ornate theatre-style interiors, have survived the changing pattern of cinema going. When it opened in 1929, the Majestic was hailed as Mapperley's best building.

Unlike much of Thraves' work, the Majestic wasn't lost when the cinema stopped showing

films in the 1950s. Various businesses have made use of the space, including an interior design firm which restored the interior in the 1980s, carefully preserving the plasterwork and winning an award from Nottingham Civic Society.

Developer Konda Properties, which owns the site, has submitted plans to Nottingham city council to demolish the building in its entirety to make way for 26 flats. The plans describe the venue as a "redundant cinema... closed to the public for many years" and currently in use only as a space for martial arts classes. However, in 2018 a novelty "ghost hunting" company took over the lease and created a "haunted" museum for its events. It also regularly screens classic scary movies and runs a tearoom in the balcony.

Local historian Bob Massey has called for the plans to be rejected and the building to be listed. "This is a very important building and of great historical significance in the area; the building should be retained. The present tenants are doing a very good job keeping the building running, including maintaining its original decor and plaster work," he wrote in the Nottinghamshire Local History Association newsletter.

"It would be a huge loss to the area and Mapperley's history if this building was demolished. Few cinema buildings as good as this in their original form still exist and even fewer in as good a condition."

BLOB In Birmingham, meanwhile, the grade II-listed art deco Harborne Royalty Cinema was hit by a third fire last month. Like the Majestic, it ceased use as a cinema in the 1950s and has had a chequered history since then, including being used as a bingo hall and, er, cannabis farm. A major fire last year badly damaged the interior.

THE Alexander Thomson Society has launched an international architecture competition in an attempt to raise the plight of the Glaswegian architect's spectacular yet crumbling Egyptian Halls building, which has lain largely empty for 40 years.

The Eye's Piloti highlighted the building's troubles many times, describing it as deserving to be as "famous and cherished" as the city's unfortunately fire-prone School of Art (Eye 1441). He condemned the complacent inactivity of Glasgow city council (GCC) and Historic Scotland over the Category A listed building on Union Street, which was designed by Thomson and built in 1870-72.

Although there are shops on the ground floor, the colonnaded upper façade is now wrapped in scaffolding and protective fabric. The society says the interior has suffered thanks to water leaks and a lack of adequate maintenance. It hopes the competition will inspire "innovative, imaginative and purposeful design solutions" to demonstrate what Glasgow is missing by leaving one of its most interesting buildings, by one of the city's best architects, under wraps.

Difficulties over restoring the building began in the 1980s when it had multiple owners. A compulsory purchase order (CPO) in the 1990s brought in interested investors who had what looked like a good and viable plan for shops and a hotel. But issues with the purchasing process led to years of legal wrangling and acrimonious disagreement with GCC.

Derek Souter, director of the property companies involved, says the flawed CPO process landed his business with a legal nightmare to disentangle them from the former owners' claims for compensation. By the time that was resolved, restoration costs had escalated. GCC denies there was any impropriety involved.

Mr Souter is backing the society's new competition but says there is no way the owners can now afford to restore the building without a grant or public support. Alas, relations between the owners and GCC are now at the point where GCC refuses to respond to freedom of information requests – making any future cooperation over restoration difficult.

HOUSING NEWS

FIRST, the good news for ministers: supreme court judges have overturned a high court ruling that the benefit cap unlawfully discriminates against lone parents and their children; and a new analysis concludes that the government is at last showing some leadership on homelessness and rough sleeping.

But even before the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty had accused the government of presiding over "the systematic immiseration of millions" – prompting a formal complaint from work and pensions secretary Amber Rudd – the headlines were losing their shine.

While the judges found the discrimination was lawful, they also said there was no evidence the benefit cap is achieving stated aims, but rather "sound reasons to accept" that it is inflicting poverty on claimants. And while the researchers who compiled the latest Homelessness Monitor published by Crisis hailed some positive early results from the government's 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act, they were far outweighed by the impact of cuts in housing and welfare budgets since 2010.

With little investment in new social housing and thousands of existing homes sold under the Right to Buy, the number of lettings to homeless families is down 20 percent on five years ago and half what it was in the 1990s. Changes in landlords' letting policies are making things worse, with two-thirds of local authorities reporting that affordability tests imposed by housing associations are making it increasingly difficult for homeless households to get tenancies. There are now 85,000+ homeless families stuck in temporary accommodation, an increase of 71 percent since 2011.

Letters

Lookalike

Upside Down House **Brexit party**

Sir,

Is the Upside Down House in Brighton by any chance related to the Brexit Party?

F. DOVE,

Dartford, Kent.

Cherry picking

Sir,

Re the Farage fruitcake cover (Eye 1496). Well, I suppose you could argue that because there's a cherry in it, it's a fruitcake. But it's not, is it? It's a madeira cake.

JACKIE ENDERBY.

Virgin mirth

Sir,

I too enjoyed the cover of Eye 1495, apart from the unintentional assistance toward product placement facilitated from the less-than-noble athlete. Still, Beardie's marketing department will raises their glasses to Lord Gnome for the freebie.

I also enjoyed the front cover of Eye 1496, which was very witty. Does this prove that Brexiteers are not totally devoid of humour, despite the almost incessant amount of bad news heaped upon us on a daily basis?

And, another thing...

Eye 1495, p10: "He [Farage] may have won the Brexit referendum by demonising East European immigrants..."

Eye 1495, p11: "...the number of Albanians in British prisons has ballooned to more than 700..."

So perhaps he had a point? The facts surely speak for themselves...

JAMES MASON.

Trade betrayed

Sir,

Am I the only reader of your great organ to be shocked by the parlous level of trade agreements the UK has?

I note we now have signed trade agreements with the economic powerhouses of Chile, Faroe Islands, Iceland, Norway, Israel, Liechtenstein, Palestinian Authority, Switzerland, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Christopher and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Zimbabwe, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. The UK also has, I read, mutual recognition agreements with Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

A cracking result, at 34 countries after three years of Brexit in the making. Only 161 to go, which at current progress takes us to2036. The question is, will Brexit have happened by then?

EMMA BAGLEY,

Bristol.