

Heritage heroes

If it wasn't for a few caring people, many of our neighbourhoods would lose precious architecture. Jane Barry finds volunteers

ALL over London, volunteers are using their free time to lobby councils, drop leaflets and run committees — all in the cause of saving our heritage. Some groups are fighting to save a single building. Many campaign to preserve historic architecture in local areas, from Battersea to Bloomsbury, and Finchley to Islington.

Even in localities where insensitive development has taken a heavy toll, there are volunteers battling to save what is left — the Staines Town Society, for instance, wages a valiant campaign to preserve the town's Roman heritage and its few remaining Georgian and Regency buildings.

Does all this activity get results? Philip Davies of English Heritage believes it is "absolutely crucial". He says: "Because these groups are locally based, they are more alert to threats to the historic environment."

Adam Wilkinson of Save Britain's Heritage says: "They provide the detail and the local knowledge. And they have bags of energy." And Tim Whittaker of the Spitalfields Trust agrees: "People who are not trained professionals have done so much to save our heritage."

In fact, most established preservation trusts, from Save and the Spitalfields Trust to the specialist architectural societies, such as The Georgian Group and The Victorian Society, started as volunteer groups, and still need help from volunteers.

Matthew Slocombe of The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings believes volunteer groups are becoming increasingly professional in their approach. The Camden Civic Society, for instance, has employed architect Arts Lettres Techniques to put up an alternative proposal to a Crown Estate scheme. "This could be the way things should go," Slocombe says.

The Hackney Society, founded in 1967, is one of London's long-established groups and originally run entirely by volunteers. It is now a registered charity and employs two professional workers.

Among the society's current concerns is the Clapton Portico, all that remains of the Victorian London Orphanage Asylum. Hackney plans to incorporate the grand Doric portico into a new education centre and "we just like to keep an eye on things", says Kevin Moore, one of the professional conservation workers.

The Hammersmith and Fulham Historic Buildings Group (HFHBG) was set up in 1987. All the workers are volunteers. The group's 1987 list of the borough's 1,800 historic buildings was incorporated into the council's Unitary Development Plan, and HFHBG has just completed a second survey, which includes more than 3,500 photographs.

"When people say they haven't altered buildings, we can use our photographs as evidence," says chairman Angela Dixon.

At the moment, the group is fighting a proposed riverside extension to the Victorian Hammersmith Pumping Station, part of a scheme to convert the building into flats. According to Dixon: "The extension will spoil the building's roof line and block the river view."



Saviours: members of the Historic Buildings Group and Hammersmith Pumping Station

Crouch End for People (CEP) has a single objective; to save Hornsey Town Hall for the community. The Grade II listed 1930s building retains its original

floors, fittings and textiles, but it needs structural work and suffers from damp.

"It's been hard to get the right volunteers," says IT manager Stephen Morpurgo, one of the seven-strong volunteer steering committee.

Another steering group member is child-protection lawyer Sheila Kavanagh, who organises funding. "I took a year out from my work to do other things," she says, "and ended up doing the Town Hall. For me, it's as much about the building as the community."

○ The Hackney Society: 020 7254 0212

○ Hammersmith and Fulham Historic Buildings Group: 020 8563 8953

○ Crouch End for People:
www.crouchendforpeople.org

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