

NOOKS and CORNERS

LOOK at those big isolated clumps of buildings rising above the slates, like brick islands in a lead coloured sea," observed Sherlock Holmes to Dr Watson as they rattled along one of the railway viaducts near Clapham Junction. "The Board Schools." "Lighthouses, my boy! Beacons of the future! Capsules, with hundreds of bright little seeds in each, out of which will spring the wiser, better England of the future."

The language is almost Blairite – except that the surviving Board Schools, it seems, have no place in the bright New Labour future.

It is not often that George Galloway MP finds himself on the same platform as the Conservatives. He did a few weeks back in Bethnal Green when the leaders of the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and the Respect Party groups in the London borough of Tower Hamlets were all united in condemning the dubious commercially-motivated policies of the ruling Labour majority of councillors. The

occasion was the laying of a wreath on the wall of the Bonner Street School, one of the many schools built in the East End following the passing of Forster's Education Act of 1870.

The Bonner Street building was built in 1875-76 to the designs of E.R. Robson, architect to the London School Board, and his partner J.J. Stevenson. With its Dutch gables and tall windows lighting airy classrooms, enhanced by a sculptured panel by Spencer Stanhope illustrating "knowledge strangling ignorance", this three-storey, properly urban building is a fine example of the progressive brick "Queen Anne" style which so well expressed the enlightened aims of the act. And now, having survived the bombing of the Second World War which destroyed so much of this longsuffering part of London, it is to be demolished to make way for a playground and car park.

Bonner Street was (surely wrongly) rejected for listing in a survey of Board Schools in 1994 on the grounds that it had been altered by enlargement, although English Heritage insisted that it is "a solid local landmark" and "a building of very strong local interest". It is a sound and handsome building which could perfectly well continue in educational use or, if not, could be converted into flats (as proposed in 2001 when planning permission was given for a new school building).

Instead it is being demolished to facilitate the nefarious Private Finance Initiative which is being used by Tower Hamlets to build new schools. A mediocre two-storey new block has already gone up, built by Balfour Beatty; and, for the next phase, it is found to be easier to build on the existing playground and demolish the old Board School block to create

open space rather than to work with and modernise the Robson & Stevenson building. That, after all, would require sensitivity, intelligence and architectural skill – qualities not available under PFI.

So, despite the vigorous opposition of the Save Old Bonner School Campaign, which submitted a petition against demolition signed by 719 local residents, together with the Victorian Society, this excellent former "beacon of the future" is coming down. The speakers at the "funeral" ceremony emphasised its importance as a piece of local history. What also should be said is that it is a sound and useful building which could and ought to have a future.



Bonner...a goner?

The situation here contrasts pertinently with that at the Geoffrey Chaucer School off the Old Kent Road where the Twentieth Century Society is fighting a proposal by Southwark Council to demolish most of a remarkable but flawed complex of buildings of 1958 by Chamberlin, Powell & Bon (architects of the Barbican) to make way for one of Blair's new city academies, but where the adjacent Board School of 1873-75 (by Col. Edis) is being retained. Why? Because it *works* as a school building.

Bonner Street is not a unique case. All over Britain perfectly sound and handsome school buildings are threatened with replacement. This is because the Blair government's answer to all problems is to fling money at them and indulge in cheap, spurious rhetoric about newness and modernity. So £45bn has been allotted to rebuild or refurbish every secondary school in the country. And, as most of this work will be done under the favoured PFI, it is easier – and so much more profitable for the contractors and management companies – just to rebuild. Yet the evidence is mounting up about the inadequate and poorly performing buildings that result (and rumour has it in Tower Hamlets that the first new building at Bonner Street will soon have to be replaced.) A study commissioned by the Department for Education & Skills recently looked at twelve "exemplar" new schools and found that they used up to five times more energy than they were designed to. That means electricity, the generation of which contributes to climate change to whose alarming consequences our government has at last woken up. Solid masonry buildings, like old Bonner Street, are usually more efficient thermally as well as representing so much "embodied energy" that it is wicked and foolish to waste.

Meanwhile, the local campaigners are demanding that at least the single-storey infants' wing is retained as a "pavilion" in the playground. This would be better than nothing, so good luck to them.

'Piloti'