

1966 plans for a new building at Holmbury

UCL became the owner of the Holmbury House estate early in 1965. The house was an empty shell in desperate need of refurbishment. There was no heating, the water had been turned off, and to meet the interests of the one-time owner the Rt Hon. H.E. Guinness the electricity supply was almost wholly at 115v, fed from a large transformer in the garage block. There was but a single 230v outlet on the first floor landing, no doubt put there to supply vacuum cleaners.

Nevertheless a grandiose plan had been formulated by Doug Davis at College for the large-scale development of the site—new roads, new research blocks, student accommodation blocks and the like. An architect's outline plan had been submitted to the local planning authority through the Bursar. When I joined UCL in July 1965 I learned that the county planners were anxious to know more. Furthermore, if UCL was to have any chance of getting funding for this development from the then University Grants Committee it needed an architect's outline scheme drawn up, priced and placed on the College Bursar's list of capital projects at once.

I therefore set to in the tumult of the conversion that had begun in the October 1965 and devised a scheme that had some prospect of success. Out went the student blocks, out, indeed, went most things, for the county officials had made it plain to me that in an area of outstanding natural beauty any development had to be hidden. Moreover the local environmental group were girding their loins against us.

I managed to devise and cost on UGC guidelines a laboratory building that would have been of major benefit to us. It was to be situated on the Gladstone Walk in front of the tall brick wall behind which were to be the mechanical workshops, and was to be adroitly connected to the main building. The existing conifers would come down to make room for the building but it would be screened by a new line of conifers which I had already had planted further forward.

The architect drew up the plan, submitted it to the planners and got it approved. He even built a model of the new development and presented it to me. The UCL Bursar put the plan on his capital projects list and had it approved by the appropriate College planning committee. All seemed to be going well when, on the heels of the economic crisis of July 1965 when the Government had banned for six months all new University building contracts, a new edict was announced, the Government was withdrawing its capital development grants to all universities. At a stroke the College's capital projects list vanished. All that remained at Holmbury was the model and a row of little conifers.

When planning the proposed building the splendid giant sequoia or Wellingtonia—the one that still stands close to the main house—seemed to me a problem, for it would be in the way of the linking section of the new building. It wouldn't actually impede its construction, but access by a new road from the rear would be impossible. And what if it blew down? So I asked the local planners if it would be in order to take it down. They sent along a consultant. 'Giant sequoias mostly came into this country via Russia in the 1870s,' he said, 'but the rainfall is too low and they don't live much beyond 100 years. It's in good shape now but best have it down. I will recommend that.' His report, copied to me, was neatly expurgated

for the benefit of the local planning committee. Only the comment that it was in good shape survived. The committee accordingly recommended against its felling.

Eric Dorling March 2006