

# The Craven Street Gazette

NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HOUSE • ISSUE 2 • AUTUMN 1998

**T**HE NEGLECTED LONDON HOUSE which was home to Benjamin Franklin is being transformed as part of an inspired renovation plan.

The house at 36 Craven Street in central London has undergone essential structural repairs in the first phase of its complete restoration and the ground and first floors of the house have now been opened for limited public access.

The work began in November 1997, starting with the demolition of Victorian extensions at the back of the house; the reinstatement and repair of many of the windows and essential strengthening of some of the major beams and joists.

Extensive work had to be done on the facade of the building and the roof was in such a bad state it had to be rebuilt and re-slatted. The spine wall leading from the sitting room to Franklin's laboratory was completely reinstated because at some point the one original doorway had been made into two, causing the building to sag.

Floors and panelling throughout the house have been repaired and in some cases replaced. All the original ceilings have been

## Franklin's House comes back to life

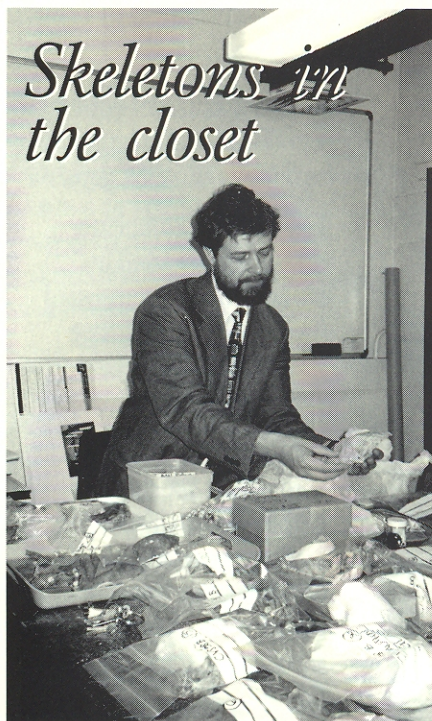
kept and many of the Georgian wood cornices are intact. The house has been completely damp-proofed, treated for dry rot and equipped with basic heating, plumbing and electrical wiring.

The total cost of the phase one work was £772,000, funded by the Friends of Benjamin Franklin House charities in the UK and the USA and through grants from English Heritage, The Lottery, The Getty Trust and the William Hewlett Trust.

Phase II will complete the interior decorations on the lower floors and finish the ceilings, flooring and heating on the second and third floors.

The aim is to restore the house to the condition it was in when Franklin lived there. The work is planned in four phases with a total estimated cost of more than five and a half million pounds. The completion of phase I now brings a fresh challenge – to raise the £400,000 needed to begin phase II.

Full details of the restoration work appear on the next page.



**T**HE CRAVEN STREET RESTORATION work was dramatically interrupted when the skeletons of ten bodies were discovered in the cellars.

'It was like a horror movie,' said builder Jim Fields, who found the bones last December while digging the foundations. After analysis, it was found that the bones were around 200 years old and probable vestiges from the exploratory dissections done by William Hewson, a young surgeon who lived at no. 36 for two years. Hewson, who had already achieved a reputation for good research, had built a small anatomy school at the back of the house.

But all such schools faced a major problem – the lack of bodies to dissect. Dissection of human bodies was strictly prohibited in England until the middle of the nineteenth century and scientists had to obtain cadavers from grave robbers. It was a risky business for which they faced the penalty of deportation, so the remains had to be disposed of secretly.

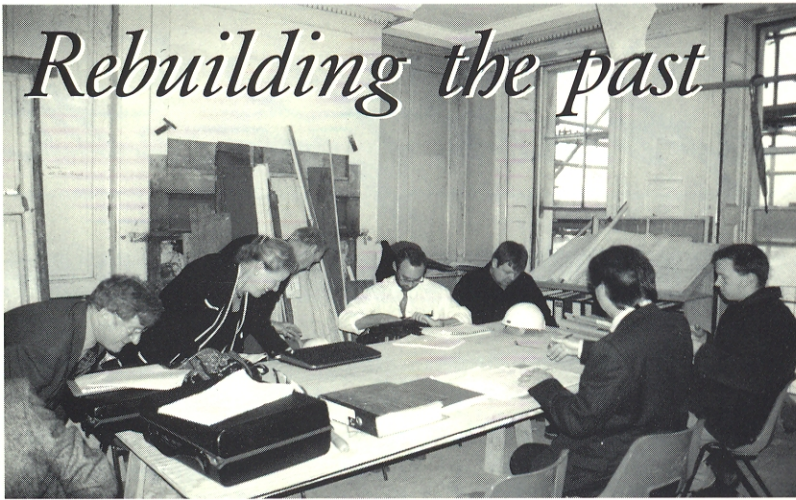
Ironically, Dr. Hewson fell victim to his own experiments by cutting himself while dissecting a putrid corpse, dying of septicaemia on May 1, 1774.

It is probable that Franklin knew what Hewson was doing but unlikely that he participated, being a physicist rather than a medical man.

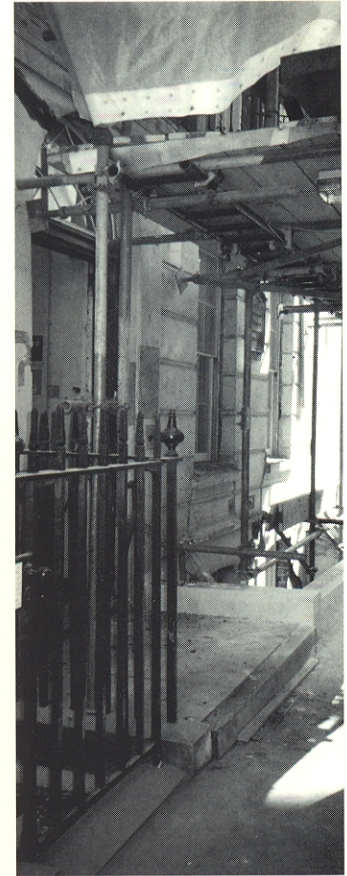
The University Institute of Archaeology has been analysing the find and will give the first public lecture on its significance in October. Dr. Brian Owen-Smith, President-elect of the Hunterian Society, assisted by Dr. Simon Hillson of the Institute of Archaeology, will lecture on Benjamin Franklin and the Bones of 36 Craven Street at 6pm on Monday October 19 in the Great Room of the RSA, 8 John Adam Street, London WC2, followed by a reception and display in the Benjamin Franklin Room. Tickets are £20 from 0171 430 2384.

The lecture will mark the start of fundraising for the second phase of restoration work at 36 Craven Street.

# Rebuilding the past



LEFT:  
A construction meeting taking place in Franklin's Parlour



RIGHT:  
Scaffolding temporarily securing the front wall of the House

THE BENJAMIN FRANKLIN HOUSE was built in 1730 on the former estate of the Earls of Craven, just off the Strand on the south side of Charing Cross Station. After being bombed twice during World War Two the rafters on the roof were replaced – and this was the last time the building had any significant repairs done to it.

Years of water damage had seriously undermined the structure of the building, but the real culprits were those who cut through the diagonal braces sometime in the 1800s to put in second doors. This caused the building to sag, which it has done steadily ever since. To counteract any further sagging, steel channels have been put up in the roof space with turn buckles to suspend each floor.

A major problem was discovered on the front wall where the facing brick had pulled away by four inches. They had to be reattached with stainless steel ties to make the facade secure.

The primary beams of the house were still in good condition, but some had to be strengthened with steel plates. To do this, all the floor boards had to be taken out and carefully numbered so they would fit back into their proper places.

A lot of damage had been done to the two top floors. Here, vertical stainless steel connections were put in place and chemically connected to the outside wall. The top nine courses of brick had to be totally replaced and old bricks were taken out and re-used

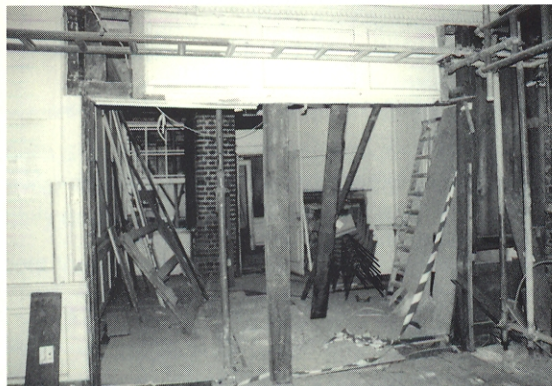
*‘If man could  
his wishes,  
double his*

wherever possible, while new ‘old bricks’ had to be specially ordered to fill in the gaps.

The roof was completely rebuilt and re-slatted and changed from the mansard that Franklin would have known to the two-peaked roof which was similar to one of 1792.

Throughout the house, many of the windows needed repair and some had to be replaced, with authentic hand-made glass maintaining the appearance of the 18th century house.

BELOW:  
Benjamin Franklin's Parlour, showing (right) the work necessary to counteract the sagging



# The American Connection

*T*WO AMERICAN WOMEN have been at the heart of the Craven Street restoration – Mary, Countess of Bessborough and Anne Prescott Keigher.

Lady Bessborough was born in Pennsylvania and met her husband in Paris. When they returned to England, she became involved with the British Society of International Understanding and attended meetings at their offices at 36 Craven Street.

Soon afterwards, the state of the house began to cause concern. Its historical role began to be appreciated and the shabby, narrow house came to be seen as a unique treasure of the Anglo-American heritage.

The first moves to turn the house into a centre for English-American friendship and understanding came in 1971, with Lady Bessborough playing a leading role.



*Lady Bessborough and Anne Keigher*

Eve party. She says: 'There was a lot of champagne and this could be said to have launched my voluntary work as project manager for the restoration of the house.'

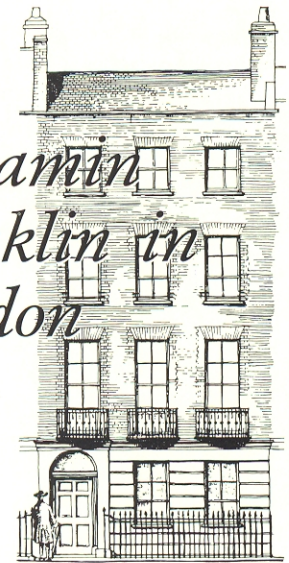
She says she has never met a challenge like 36 Craven Street. Drawing up a detailed business plan was a lengthy and complex task – but essential to convince potential donors that this was a serious and worthwhile project.

Benjamin Franklin had been an early Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and in 1995 there began a formal association between the Friends and the RSA. A project office was set up at the Society's headquarters in John Adam Street where the architects under Anne's direction began to make detailed plans.

She says: 'By the end of phase I we will have established a sense of place out of this neglected and forgotten Georgian Grade 1 listed building and ensured that its heritage is protected for the 21st century.'

The Friends of Benjamin Franklin in the UK have always worked closely with their American counterparts. In January 1990 George Bush, President of the United States, signed an Act of Congress, pledging Federal Support to Benjamin Franklin House and in 1992 The Friends of Benjamin Franklin (US) Charity was established in Washington DC. In September 1997 the doors of Carpenter's Hall were thrown open to a celebration of the grand opening of the US office of The Friends of Benjamin Franklin House in Philadelphia.

## Benjamin Franklin in London



*'I* HAVE FOUND genteel lodgings in Craven Street,' Benjamin Franklin wrote to his wife Deborah shortly after arriving in London in 1757 as the Representative of the Philadelphia Assembly.

The house was Franklin's home for 16 years and to all intents and purposes became the first American Embassy. It was here that Franklin invented bifocal spectacles, a 24 hour clock for navigation, watertight bulkheads for ships and the glass Armonica for which Mozart, Beethoven and Gluck composed. He also devised equipment to measure the temperature of sea water at different depths, so enabling him to draw the first map of the Gulf Stream.

Franklin had already discovered the electrical property of lightning by flying metal tipped kites during thunder storms and by experimenting with different metals, he perfected his famous lightning rod conductor. At Craven Street he discovered the positive and negative charge of electricity – the foundations of modern electrical science – and the fuel-saving Franklin Stove. He suggested Daylight Saving Time and one hot summer invented the air bath, the forerunner of modern air conditioning.

This remarkable man is revered by fellow Americans as one of the leading figures in the struggle for independence. He worked for reconciliation with the mother country but when in his opinion it had become impossible, he returned to America and supported the revolution. He helped to frame the Declaration of Independence and in extreme old age was a member of the Convention which drafted the American Constitution.

He lived to be 84, a citizen of the United States of America.

*ould have half  
he would  
troubles. '*

She interested the then American Ambassador, Walter Annenberg in the project and he made the first big donation towards it. In 1976 SmithKline Beecham of Philadelphia and London donated \$200,000 which was used to purchase a 150 year lease on the building.

In 1978 The Friends of Benjamin Franklin House formally acquired registered charitable status in the UK and became the sole occupants of the house in 1986. Three years later the British Government gave them the freehold. But it was a chance meeting between Lady Bessborough and architect Anne Keigher which really pushed the project forward.

Anne came to London 11 years ago and met Lady Bessborough at a New Year's

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# The Craven Street Gazette

Joan M. Reid

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**B**ENJAMIN FRANKLIN was a man of many talents and one of his lifelong delights was writing good-humoured parodies of current events. In 1770 his landlady Margaret Stevenson went away on a visit and Polly and William Hewson moved in to look after him. He wrote a spoof newspaper called *The Craven Street Gazette* about happenings at home during Margaret's absence.

Saturday September 22 was departure day for 'Queen Margaret'. Franklin wrote: 'Immediately the whole street was in tears, from a heavy shower of rain.' It was also the ninth anniversary of George III's coronation and Franklin was supposed to go to the Court of St. James's to pay his respects. But a common family crisis occurred: 'Queen Margaret having carried off the key of the drawers, so that the Lady of the Bedchamber (Polly Hewson) could not find a laced shirt for His Highness.'

Franklin missed his visit to Court but the household promised to be better organised for church the next day.

Sunday September 23: 'It is now found by sad experience that good resolutions are easier made than executed. Notwithstanding yesterday's solemn order of council, nobody went to church today. It seems that the Great Person's broad bulk lay so long abed that the breakfast was not over till it was too late to dress'. At least, that was the excuse.

Later that day, the Hewsons went to Kensington. Back at the house, Franklin found it preferable to make an imaginary visit. 'Dr. Fatsides made 469 turns in his dining room, as the exact distance of a visit to the lovely Lady Barwell, whom he did not find at home, so there was no struggle for and against a kiss, and he sat down to dream in the easy chair that he had it without trouble.'

The four issues of the *Gazette* are peppered with comments on food, clearly an important subject. Franklin is promised 'roasted shoulder of mutton and potatoes for his dinner' but in the determination to attend church, a hot dinner is sacrificed for cold mutton and apple pie. On the Monday, the 'Great Person' dines on cold boiled beef because the 'Ministers' (the Hewsons) are somewhere else, eating hot roast venison. 'Dr Fatsides' feels a little put out.

We don't know whether the gazettes were sent to Margaret, but they were probably read and laughed over by visitors to the house and they certainly added to the hilarity and gleeful spirits that permeated 36 Craven Street.

The Friends of Benjamin Franklin are continuing the tradition of the *Craven Street Gazette* with this newsletter, published twice a year. It sets out to inform readers of the progress of the building project and to give a flavour of the life and times of Benjamin Franklin. The title is a facsimile of Franklin's original.



## The Friends of Benjamin Franklin House

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The Friends of Benjamin Franklin House is a membership organisation responsible for the repair, general operation and maintenance of the house and the Franklin memorabilia which will be on display there. Because we receive no Government support we rely entirely on the generosity of our members for our operating expenses.

If you would like more information about the Friends of Benjamin Franklin House and how you can join us, please contact:

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