
Premises! Premises!

GEORGE BAND

(Plate 32)

In September 1991, the Alpine Club moved into its new premises at 55 Charlotte Road EC2, on the fringe of the City. This was the Club's first freehold property in its 134 year history. The Editor felt that the saga of its acquisition should be recorded by someone who was closely involved at every stage and asked me to write it.

Although the main events were concentrated over the last three years, the seeds of success were sown in 1956 when the then Honorary Secretary, Emlyn Jones, negotiated an extension of the lease at 74 South Audley Street until 2010 at a fixed price of £800 per annum, with the landlord still paying the rates, heating and maintenance. This cost the Club £2500. Emlyn had to assure the then President, Sir Edwin Herbert (later Lord Tangle), that if we subsequently wished to move, we stood a good chance of getting our money back!

As a result of this brilliant deal, our members enjoyed premises in Mayfair for a very modest annual subscription, subsidised even further by daytime letting of the gallery for art exhibitions. But we lived in a dream world which could not last. If we spun it out to 2010 the Club would be homeless. Wisely, in the mid-1970s, the Committee had set up an endowment fund to provide for future premises but, with soaring property values, it was unlikely to be adequate. The alternative was to sell the existing lease while there were sufficient years remaining to give it commercial value. The landlord was keen to redevelop the property so, early in 1988, after some years of sporadic negotiations, he finally offered the Club £500,000 to surrender the lease by 31 March 1990.

The Committee considered this a fair price, and the decision was endorsed at a special General Meeting of the Club on 20 September 1988. Fortuitously, we sold close to the top of the recent property boom. This sum, plus the endowment funds, should allow the Club to acquire premises of its own. Where should they be? Previous Committees had always assumed they should remain in London, but a ground swell of opinion was suggesting they should be further north, where the majority of British climbers lived, and preferably in a mountain area. This perhaps overlooked the international nature of the Club with 20% of its membership coming from 30 foreign countries. A paper and questionnaire, drafted by our hard-working Honorary Secretary Stephen Town, had previously been circulated to widen the debate and encourage a clear majority decision which the Club would not later regret. There was a 60% response in which a 77% majority preferred to remain in London. The same broad conclusion was evident from the lively debate at the meeting in London on 20 September and at an informal gathering a week later in the Lake District,

although I confess to a procedural weakness that no formal vote was taken in London. Some felt that our members in the South-East would unduly influence the vote but it was significant that, in the responses to the questionnaire, a majority of those living outside the South-East still voted for London.

At this same time, by chance, the Royal Geographical Society was seeking planning permission for a commercial development in its garden off Exhibition Road. Our strong historical links with the Society, reinforced by two recent RGS Presidents, Lord Hunt and Lord Chorley, who had also been Presidents of the AC, made it natural to consider participation in this development as the preferred option. Consequently, on the Club's behalf, the Committee undertook to acquire a 125 year lease on a portion of the development, to be built to our own specification. This would be some 3500-4000 sq ft at lower ground level, lit from above, with a mutually advantageous inter-connection with the RGS. To its detractors, and there were some, it quickly became known as the 'Kensington bunker'. If negotiations and the construction itself proceeded smoothly and we could afford it, we would be in occupation by early 1992.

Meanwhile, we were able to lease two small rooms on the top floor of the Ski Club of Great Britain in Eaton Square, sufficient for a cramped office and mini-library. The rest of the Club's effects were placed in storage and we were most grateful to Bob Lawford and his helpers for organising and executing the move to these temporary facilities which might serve us for two years at the most. For lectures, we hired the Council room of the Institute of Naval Architects across the road. The best part was the Ski Club's congenial bar which was well patronised both before and after lectures. We were extremely grateful to the Ski Club for letting us use their facilities:

Before completing my three-year term of office as Club President in December 1989, I had hoped to be able to deliver a firm contract for our new premises at Exhibition Road to my successor, Tony Streater. It was not to be. After several months of frustration, created by the usual interminable local authority delays, formal planning consent had been granted so that detailed negotiations with the developer on the layout, fitting out, and associated price could proceed. With his characteristic energy and enthusiasm, Sir Alan Pullinger headed a Premises Working Group to provide the architect with a design brief for fitting out the basic shell and Emlyn Jones spearheaded the price negotiations. By the summer of 1990 these had narrowed down to a total of about £665,000 including around £200,000 for fitting out to the Club's own requirements. However, negotiations between the various parties – the developer, his bankers, the RGS and the Club and their respective solicitors – were proving much more frustrating and time consuming than anyone had ever expected.

During this delay, both the Committee and members generally began to question whether this would be money well spent, particularly if the lecture hall was not fully utilised. Could not space be allocated for simple 'bunkhouse' accommodation for out-of-town members? Also, if the Club ever wanted to move again, how free and easy would it be to dispose of these specialised premises and what might they realise? With the currently depressed state of the property market, could we not find existing alternative premises with fewer

planning restrictions, which we could adapt for much the same total cost? Committee minutes over this period make interesting reading.

These issues were aired in a formal and constructive debate specially convened on 3 April 1990. A show of hands concluded 48 in favour of pressing on with the Exhibition Road site, 22 against and 3 abstentions. Members unable to attend were invited to respond in writing. Some 80 had done so and their opinions were in much the same proportion.

Although it might seem strange to consider reselling a property before we had even bought it, the Committee took careful note of the debate. In fact, in February they had already decided to commission an open market valuation of the proposed premises assuming, as was likely, that any future sale would be restricted to club use. A valuation by Cluttons, given on 12 June 1990, was £350,000. This surprised many of us, but others said what would you expect if you tried to resell anything purpose-built such as a customised car or Savile Row suit?

The potentially divisive debate was particularly enlivened at this time by Mike Banks speaking out for the vocal minority, resigning from the Committee, and publishing his own delightfully readable if not entirely accurate Opinion in the October 1990 *Climber and Hill Walker*. Under the headline 'Rebellion in the hallowed halls' the lines below declared that 'never had so much club money slurped around the British climbing scene' and 'there were verbal punch-ups well worthy of the Club's pugnacious Victorian founders'. I leave the rest to your imagination.

Although the Committee had been ready and open to consider other London premises, Cluttons' valuation did reinforce the view that it should now seriously and systematically search for alternative premises, free of planning restrictions, which would be resaleable for office or business use so that the Club would preserve its capital. This could be progressed in parallel with the Exhibition Road scheme whose current viability from the developer's viewpoint was being increasingly questioned and negotiations appeared to be stalled. It could nevertheless form the base case for comparison.

Accordingly, in November 1990, the Honorary Secretary Mike Esten presented to the Committee a 'Proposed Framework for Premises Search' which redefined the specification to include: ease of access from London mainline stations, 'safe' character in the evening, reasonable on-street parking, and ability to attract letting income if there was to be a dedicated lecture room. The layout could be similar to that of South Audley Street comprising office/committee room, library, bar, lecture/club room but with the addition of 'bunkhouse' accommodation if planning permitted. A minimum of 3500 net sq ft was needed. Time-sharing with another club was not excluded. Other essential parameters were: long lease or freehold, a price below £700,000, and minimal planning restrictions – preferably B1 Office or Light Industry category. It was thought we would have to pay around £180/net sq ft, compared with £192 at Exhibition Road.

The option of commissioning and paying an agent to act on the Club's behalf was recommended but in the event proved unnecessary; in the currently depressed state of the market several reputable agents such as Cluttons,

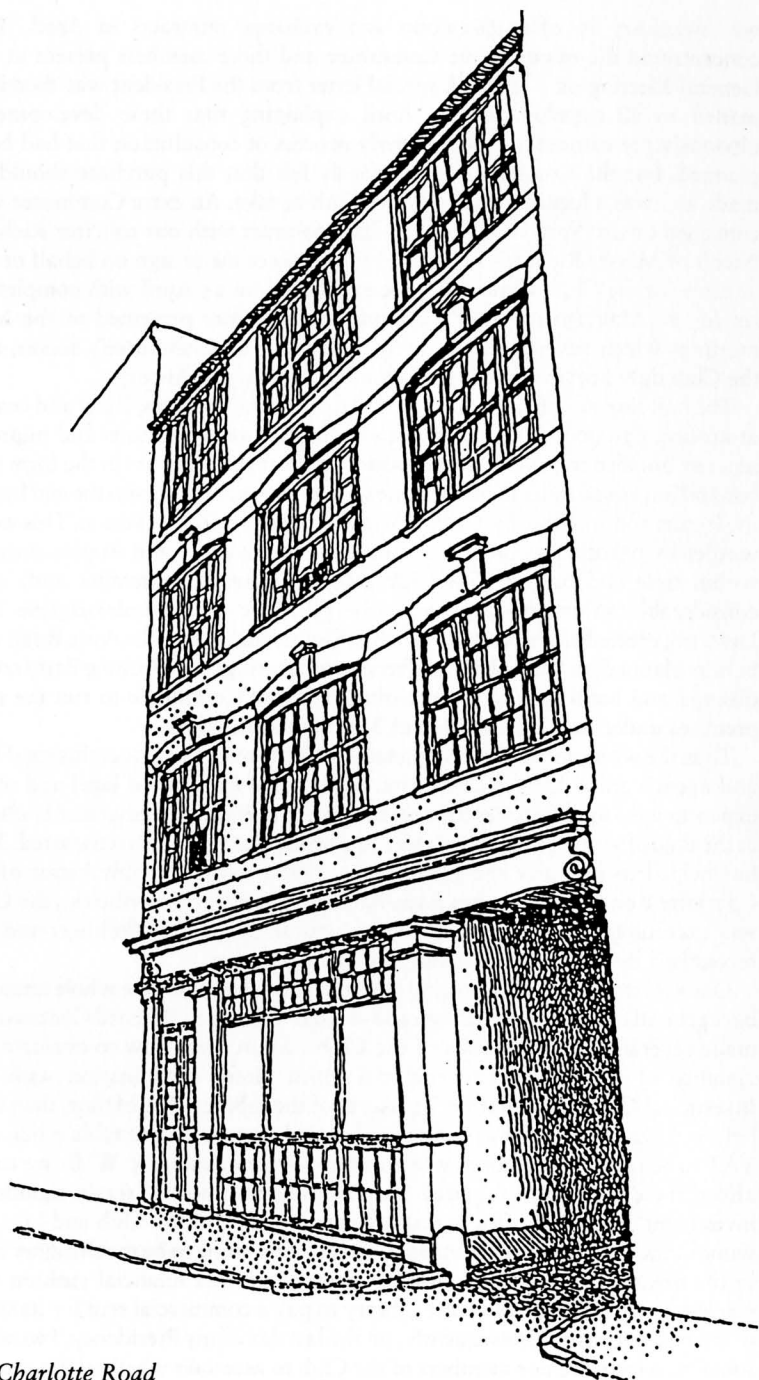
Chestertons, Weatheralls and Hamptons were only too ready to circulate our requirements widely and feed us with potential properties in addition to those we followed up ourselves. An Alternative Premises Working Party was set up to pursue the search, visit, appraise and evaluate properties and report monthly to the main Committee. I was invited to chair this group to which out of all conscience I agreed, having felt slightly guilty over saddling my successor as President with so much unfinished business. My colleagues on the Working Party were Mike Esten, Bob Lawford, Hywel Lloyd, Edward Smyth, Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders. At the same time, the Committee withdrew the authority delegated in June 1990 to Emlyn Jones to finalise an acceptable lease for the Exhibition Road development so that it would first be referred back to the Committee for comparison with the results of the search.

At the 15 January 1991 Committee, I was able to report on 20 properties, 15 of which had been visited. By the 12 February Committee, after some very depressing visits and wearing out a lot of shoe leather, we were nevertheless able to present a decision analysis worksheet scoring a shortlist of five properties which met the essential requirements, could be occupied within the year, and all scored favourably compared with the Exhibition Road site.

By the 12 March Committee, information on over 70 properties had been gathered and half of them visited, from Hampstead to Clapham, Hammersmith to Bethnal Green. Our various agents were now duplicating properties and nothing better was turning up, so the Working Party recommended ceasing further search and negotiating for the best shortlisted property, which seemed to be 55 Charlotte Road, EC2. First visited on 15 January, this modestly converted and recently refurbished warehouse, solidly built in 1906, was currently owned by a New Zealand architect, turned property developer, whose family home was just further down Remuera Road from Ed Hillary in Auckland. Was this a favourable omen? It met the essential requirements with one valuable bonus: ample space. There were 6100 net sq ft spread over four open-plan floors and a basement, so that the top two floors could be rented out to provide income while still retaining the essential 3500 sq ft for the Club. It did not have the Mayfair or West End image to which our members had become accustomed, but perhaps this was no bad thing. It was nevertheless on the fringe of the City, a short walk from several Underground stations, in a street full of character in a generally improving area.

The Working Party was authorised to commence negotiations and report back in April. Special General Meetings were set up for 14 and 18 May, in London and the Peak District respectively, to brief members and seek their full support before closing the deal.

A structural survey pronounced the building sound enough to take the heavy floor loading required by the library, and relatively few modifications were needed to adapt it for our occupation. A friendly quantity surveyor, Roger Green, was co-opted to the Working Party to cost the necessary work. Price negotiations narrowed to £625-650,000, when it became apparent that the owner was in a quandary. He was simultaneously considering an attractive alternative offer to let for six years, during which time property values should hopefully recover. Should he let or sell to us? To clinch the deal in our favour it



55 Charlotte Road

was necessary to offer £635,000 and exchange contracts in April. This concentrated the minds of the Committee and those members present at the General Meeting on 9 April. A special letter from the President was therefore mailed to all members on 12 April explaining that these developments obviously pre-empted the more orderly process of consultation that had been planned, but the Committee unanimously felt that this purchase should be made and was a legitimate risk for the Club to take. An extra Committee was convened on 23 April to review the draft contract with our solicitor Richard Nicoll of Messrs Richards Butler and to empower me to sign on behalf of the Trustees of the Club. Contracts were exchanged on 25 April with completion set for 23 May 1991. A *fait accompli* was therefore presented to the May meetings which nevertheless strongly supported the Committee's action, and the Club duly acquired the first freehold in its 134 year history.

The building modifications were drawn up by the Working Party and costed at around £70,000, principally to meet current fire regulations and improve security but also to provide some greater comfort for members in the form of a bar and improved toilet facilities. One special feature was to raise the end bay of the lecture room ceiling by 1½ft to permit a larger projection screen. This work was let by negotiated tender and completed during July and August broadly within time and budget. The Club moved in during September and, with considerable voluntary help under the guidance of the indefatigable Bob Lawford, erected all the library shelving. The first lecture at Charlotte Road was held as planned on 8 October, so after eleven meetings the Working Party could disband and hand over to a reconstituted House Committee to run the new premises under the chairmanship of Malcolm Rutherford.

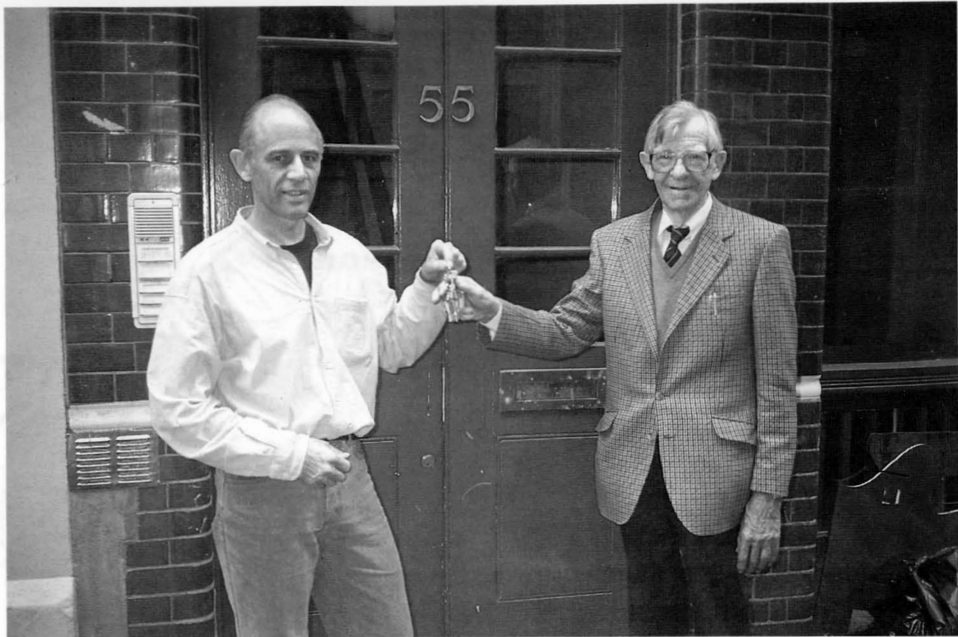
Thus the whole move was completed for a little over £700,000 plus legal fees and agent's and architect's expenses. Sadly some £27,000 of legal and other expenses were incurred over the abortive Exhibition Road arrangements where, at the time of writing in January 1992, the project had still not even started. This has helped to reinforce the general view that we are probably better off at Charlotte Road with the extra potential letting income. Nevertheless, the Club was exceedingly grateful for all the work put in by Sir Alan Pullinger and has recognised this by making him an Honorary Member.

One very important area which I have not yet covered was the whole financial background to the move. During 1988–89 our Treasurer, Richard Coatsworth, made several careful forecasts of the Club's future cash flow to evaluate the viability of the move. This required much closer coordination with the Investment Committee and the Treasurer of the Library, Jon Mellor, than ever before. There were thorny problems of capital gains tax, charitable relief, and VAT to be taken into account where expert advice was sought. While we could afford the capital sums required for new premises and still retain significant investment income, the future realistic running costs of the Club and Library, without the benefit of gallery income, were clearly going to be much higher than in the dream world of South Audley Street. A further financial cushion was needed, particularly to allow the Library to pay a commercial rent for its share of the new premises. Consequently, on the last day of my Presidency, I wrote to some 70 selected senior members of the Club to ascertain whether, if a general

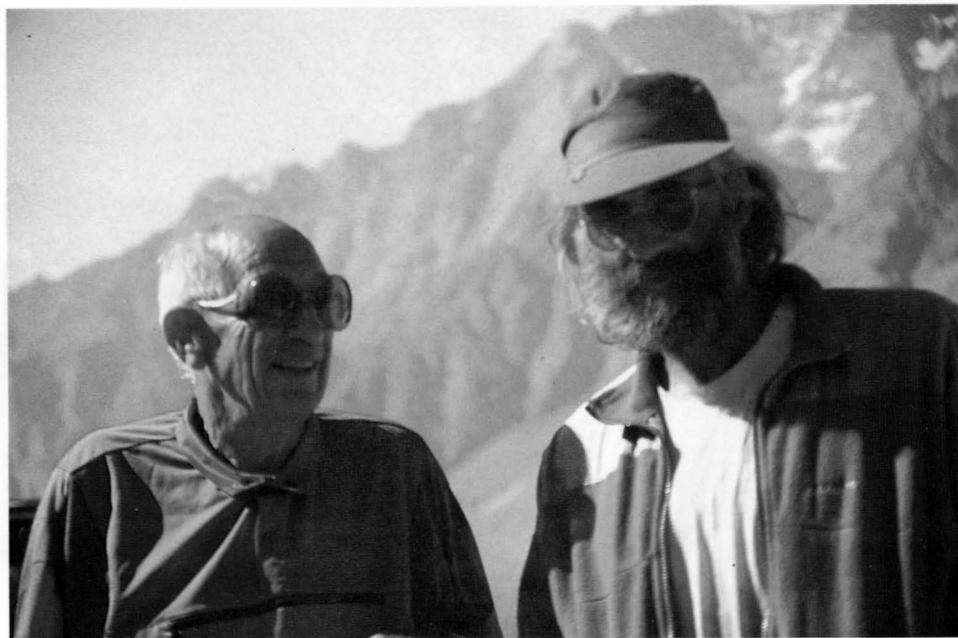
appeal was launched, they would be prepared to contribute substantially. Their response, offering to pledge a total of nearly £100,000, was a magnificent demonstration of support. This paved the way for the formal 1992 Appeal to safeguard the future of the Alpine Club Library which was launched in November 1991 with a target of £250,000.

To ensure even closer integration and prudent management of both Club and Library finances during the move and in the future, one of my successor's first actions was to set up a Finance Sub-Committee with representatives from the Club, Library, Investment and Appeal Committees under the chairmanship of one of the Vice Presidents, the Earl of Limerick, and including the new Club Treasurer, Chuck Evans. This arrangement has served to increase members' confidence that the financial management of the Club is in sound hands.

In conclusion, this account of the saga is inevitably somewhat personal, but I hope it is fair and impartial. It owes a great deal to numerous members of the Club giving generously of their time, resources and expertise. As I mentioned in my Valedictory Address in December 1989, when we all 'chose to climb' we probably never envisaged getting quite so involved in administration, high finance and real-estate management in the name of mountaineering. However, we had to see this through in order to preserve and build on all that is best for the Club and its present and future members.



32. 23 May 1991: Bob Lawford (R) receives the keys of 55 Charlotte Road from the previous owner, Robert Hanson. (*George Band*) (p179)



33. André Roch and Doug Scott. (*Isobel Shaw*) (p144)