Statement to the Holocaust Memorial Inquiry: Ken Whittaker

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My name is Ken Whittaker, I am a freelance archaeologist and historic environment consultant with over 30 years’ experience of professional and technical practice. I have led commercial historic environment teams within the planning and engineering consultancy sector for twenty years. I have worked exclusively on nationally significant infrastructure projects for over a decade. I am a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (London).

Between 2014-2017 I was on fulltime secondment to the Thames Tideway Tunnel as Archaeology and Heritage Lead. I was responsible for archaeological and heritage works at 24 worksites, mostly on the Thames riverside, including sites at the Chelsea, Albert and Victoria Embankments. I also wrote the heritage interpretation strategy that informed architectural and landscape design applied to new and re-purposed public realm.

I am happy to take questions on my statement.

**Introduction**

Sir, I have asked to address the Inquiry to draw attention to an aspect of the historic environment yet to receive consideration, but which seems to be particularly relevant to the question of whether Victoria Tower Gardens (VTG) is the right location for the National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre (NHMLC). I speak in a personal capacity, with a professional perspective, but I do not intend to express a particular view for or against the proposed scheme. I simply want the Inquiry to consider all relevant information that might help shape your recommendation on an issue of such profound public and national interest.

I refer to the legacy of monumental riverside embankments constructed along the Thames in the period 1860 to 1933, an historic enterprise that includes the genesis of VTG. During this time institutions of Parliamentary governance grappled with questions of democratic representation that continue to resonate today. Indeed, the endeavour required creation of the first pan-London governance arrangement, which has since evolved and steered the course of the metropolis from imperial epicentre to World City.

This legacy charts a direct link between environment, health and urban infrastructure, with Londoners’ self-determination, and a unique form of public realm in which citizens can explore and contest cultural values in a national discourse that forges common purpose and identity. I believe this narrative is highly relevant to the specific matters before this Inquiry.

For calibration, I also direct you to the Thames Tideway Tunnel Heritage Interpretation Strategy. This is a pan-London framework and ‘curatorial’ toolkit, prepared in collaboration with Historic England, that guides and encourages design of public realm interventions that reference:

* the unique history, governance processes and geography that contribute to the collective significance of the Thames riverside embankment,
* an understanding of the nature of the public realm associated with the Thames riverside embankment and its function in the representation and memorialisation of national values and allegories.

It will no doubt be a relief, but I have no intention to add to the melee of opinion on aesthetics generated by the question of setting. I simply note that setting can become a pre-occupation with narrow issues of viewpoint, in both a figurative and visual sense. I wish to focus your attention instead on other substantive matters. I will do so by adopting Mr Lewis’ habit of directing witnesses to address the inquiry in short themed summary topics.

**Thames Riverside Embankment and the genesis of Victoria Tower Garden**

London experienced four major cholera epidemics between 1831 and 1866 resulting in 37,000 deaths. The Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW) came into existence in 1855 to solve the capital’s urgent sanitation problems at a time of an unprecedented environmental and health crisis. The MBW reclaimed fifty-two acres of Thames foreshore between 1865 and 1870 under Sir Joseph Bazalgette’s tenure as Chief Engineer, works that coincided with the later stages in the re-building of the Palace of Westminster between 1840 and 1870.

The MBW solution was to provide urban and environmental infrastructure that tackled a deficient flood and urban sanitation system, improved public access to green space and reduced traffic congestion by creating a grand river frontage. The Thames Embankments framed the recently re-built Palace to create an architectural composition representing the pinnacle of UK civic society.

This monumental new river frontage incorporated the low-level sewer, channelled the river and formed a deck occupied by promenades and public gardens. The Embankments extended along the Middlesex bank downstream from Westminster Bridge to Blackfriars Bridge (Victoria Embankment) and upstream from Millbank to Chelsea Creek (Chelsea Embankment). Along the Surrey bank, directly facing the Palace, the Albert Embankment extends from Westminster Bridge to Vauxhall Bridge and contains St Thomas’s Hospital, the only building to occupy land the MBW reclaimed from the foreshore.

In 1928, less than 60 years after the completion of Victoria Embankment, a section of river wall at Millbank, between the Chelsea and Victoria Embankments was breached, flooding the Palace of Westminster and the Tate Gallery. Tragically, many of the crowded basement dwellings into which families were crammed were also flooded, resulting in 14 drownings, 4000 homeless and 1000 uninhabitable homes.

The London County Council (LCC), which had replaced the MBW in 1889, undertook a programme of flood defence improvements and replaced the dilapidated Lambeth Bridge. Part of this work, undertaken in 1932/3, involved the creation of the garden which accords with the current boundaries of the VTG and the simplification of the planting design to gives clear views to the Palace of Westminster.

The VTG, as altered by the LCC, incorporated the smaller garden conceived with a donation by W H Smith MP. Smith’s role as benefactor to VTG represents a direct historic connection to the MBW and the wider riverside embankment, as it was a repeat of the personal patronage conferred in the creation of Victoria Embankment Gardens, where he met costs for park furniture.

In fact, Smith was a member of the MBW from its inception in 1855, long before he became MP for Westminster in 1868. In 1870, in his parliamentary role, he successfully mounted a high-profile defence of the public interest against determined efforts to appropriate land reclaimed by the MBW at taxpayer expense for the commercial interest of the Crown Estate. Over the next three years he successfully faced down Prime Minster, William Gladstone, demonstrated parliamentarians’ independence and principal obligations to the interests of constituents and refuted unfounded assertions by powerful vested interests, such as the Crown’s claim to hold legal title to the Thames foreshore.

The continuous and upgraded embanked Thames frontage created on completion of the LCC works in 1933, improved the river frontage between Victoria and Chelsea Embankments, which is now punctuated only by the Palace of Westminster. The VTG is one of several individual public garden spaces conceived, at least in their current form, by the necessity to reclaim, embank and build flood walls along the Thames. These are connected by promenades or bridges affording access across the Thames and the wider riparian public realm and institutions.

Consequently, Victoria Tower Garden, Whitehall Garden, Victoria Embankment Garden and Middle Temple Garden share common characteristics. These garden spaces are in proximity to the Palace of Westminster, in some instances with direct views of key buildings within the World Heritage Site; they closely relate to a unified, monumental civic architecture of land reclamation; are part of a historic designed landscape intimately connected to and shaped by the riparian setting, and they function as open air galleries containing many memorial monuments. They amount to a rich juxtaposition of architecture and landscape, entailing a diverse design language, that symbolise changing attitudes on a wide range of significant topics of public interest, national values and contested legacies.

 **Heritage Interpretation and Design: Thames Tideway Tunnel Heritage Interpretation Strategy ‘River of Liberty’**

A DCO Requirement directed Thames Tideway Tunnel to prepare a Heritage Interpretation Strategy. The resulting Strategy document combines a cultural and historic narrative with a curatorial ‘tool kit’ intended to assist and guide landscape design and public art commissions in highly sensitive locations. These works are the principle public realm benefits, other than the improved water environment, arising from the consent to extend the Bazalgette sewer system, by connecting it to a deep tunnel largely following the course of the Thames, starting at Acton and finishing at Becton.

I shall not spend too much time describing the Strategy that was launched 15 February 2017. It is best viewed on-line to consider the heritage and cultural significance, cultural manifesto and design principles derived from a detailed analysis of the metropolitan Thames.

(<https://www.tideway.london/media/1476/tideway-heritage-interpretation-strategy_full-report.pdf>)

I simply highlight a few points of relevance:

* A tripartite framework is adopted within an overarching interpretive theme, ‘River of Liberty’
* This overarching theme encompassing narratives particular to groups who held advantages and benefits and, conversely, to those whose rights were denied, restricted or compromised. It engages concepts that evolve and in so doing continue to shape and influence discourses that inform London’s development
* It presents a *public history*, looking at ‘ways of life’ viewed from many cultural and socio-economic perspectives, in contrast to common heritage preoccupations with elites
* It encourages creative designs, that explore hidden or deeper meanings, drawing on a rich legacy of allegoric artistic responses to the river and events associated with the Thames
* Artists, architects, landscape designers and construction contractors are required to collaborate to create public realm that reflect the spirit of the Thames and its influence on Londoners.

VTG lies within Tideway’s central section where the Liberty theme is explored from the perspective of civic London. Here Tideway are creating new public realm at foreshore structures attached to Albert Embankment and Victoria Embankment. In the context of VTG, the site-specific narratives at the locations in closest proximity are:

Albert Embankment - St Thomas’s Hospital, built on land reclaimed by MBW, is where Florence Nightingale founded the first professional school of nursing. It was created from funds raised by subscription in honour of Nightingale’s service in Crimea. The training school was dedicated to educating and communicated the philosophy and practice of its founder and patron, including Nightingale’s strongly argued position on the removal of restrictions on women pursuing careers. The improvement in nursing care also had a transformative effect on patient outcomes.

Victoria Embankment -addresses the role of the MBW as the first pan-London system of governance and the leadership of its associates, particularly W H Smith MP, played in forging democratic institutions responsible for political representation in the interest of London’s diverse urban communities.

**Conclusion**

Sir, I fully recognise the responsibility before Counsel and yourself to consider the heritage effects in line with policy and through the statutory arrangements, by the careful and precise cataloguing and testing of ‘assets’, to understand heritage significance, determine development harm and if necessary balance loss of significance against other public benefit.

For the vast majority of applications this is a perfectly straight forward exercise. But in this location, given the issues of sensitivity arising from this application, it is apparent that there can be weaknesses if heritage considerations are not properly contextualised, as designations are not always well described or appropriately defined. Significance in this instance transcends the immediate confines of the application site, the heritage assets it contains or those in the immediate vicinity. The need to address the issue of whether the NHMLC is an appropriate intervention at VTG also justifies a more developed curatorial approach to the historic environment.

As I found when I joined the Tideway project, the big picture is the one most easily overlooked…..after all few would view a genteel historic park with a backdrop of a Neo-gothic architectural masterpiece and see instead a flood defence and sewer, let alone give weight to seemingly mundane issues of governance and public welfare that lie deeper still in the site narrative.

As set out in my introduction, the purpose of my statement is to draw attention to available resources, so that there is greater awareness of the true significance of the public realm and garden spaces and their part in the dynamic relationship between the Westminster riparian urban landscape and capital and State civic institutions.

But please excuse one personal observation. To my mind, the most resonant and poignant message gained from an understanding of the heritage significance of the Thames Embankment and VTG is that they are both products of catastrophes that occurred due to ignorance or neglect. They constitute safeguards that, had civic institutions and accountable authorities been in place, or if they had acted early enough, would have prevented unnecessary loss of life. This insight seems to resolve the separate narratives inherent to location and memorial in a powerfully numinous counterpoint.