

SOHO CLARION



The Year of the Rooster

In February, the Year of the Rooster began. According to the Chinese Zodiac, those born in Rooster years are 'optimistic, outspoken and love to be the centre of attention'. Many of these qualities are needed now by Soho's Chinese community for, despite the magnificent festivities of 13th February, the Year of the Rooster has got off to a rocky start.

The Chinese began arriving in London in the 1880s, settling at Limehouse, in the East End; by 1914 there were some 30 Chinese laundries as well as many cafés and shops. After World War Two, when Limehouse was blitzed, a few Chinese migrated to the West End to open businesses. The return of British soldiers from the Far East fuelled a demand for Chinese cuisine, and the number of restaurants began to grow. Soho became the prime area of settlement because of its bohemian, even seedy, reputation. During the war many property companies had been building up their portfolios in the Gerrard Street area with the intention of redeveloping later as part of a large-scale Piccadilly Circus scheme of comprehensive demolition and rebuilding. As a result, leases were short, rents were low, and the Chinese took the gamble. By 1960, land reform in Hong Kong had brought many migrant workers to Britain, attracted by the money-making possibilities of the by now flourishing restaurant trade. In time,

travel agents, grocers, bookshops, hairdressers, gambling clubs - even a chamber of trade - were established, and the area between Leicester Square and Shaftesbury Avenue became known as Chinatown. (And interestingly, as a result of campaigns by the Soho Society and Save Piccadilly in 1972-4, the projected redevelopment was thwarted, Piccadilly Circus was saved and tenants in Gerrard Street were able to stay.)

Over the years the Chinatown community spirit has grown, and by the end of the 1980s, Westminster Council formally recognised the unique character of the area by pedestrianising parts of it. A Chinese pagoda - to protect the Feng Shui of the area - and gates and stone lions in Gerrard Street, were erected then, and are known as the 'three sights of Chinatown'. However, one of those three may soon be lost to sight.

Rosewheel, a development company, bought tail-end leases of the buildings at the east end of Chinatown in May 2003. Initial plans indicate that it intends to change the nature of the site radically - including relocating the pagoda *inside* a new building. Tenants have been told to move out in March 2005, when the majority of their leases expire, and Chinatown will have lost its only Chinese jewellery shop, kitchen utensil specialist and fresh fish market, as well as two grocers, a news-stand and an arts and crafts shop. (A

Chinatown Economic Development Study, commissioned by Westminster Council in 2004, has concluded that the future of Chinatown would be compromised if the area consisted only of restaurants, so alternative retailers such as the above are vital.) Although Rosewheel insists that the Chinese emphasis of the area will be retained, many locals fear that, because of spiralling rents, smaller businesses will be unable to return or start up, thus allowing in bigger enterprises (non-ethnic supermarkets and other chains, for instance). And although Westminster Council have told Rosewheel that it would not support anything detrimental to the Chinese character of the area, it can do nothing further until Rosewheel applies for planning permission. Chinatown is an irreplaceable part of Soho and of London, and has always had unique tourist-drawing power. Now that China is to allow its citizens to come to Britain as tourists, which could potentially boost Britain's economy by millions, surely this is an argument for preserving, indeed enhancing, our very own slice of China. We urge Rosewheel, Westminster Council and Ken Livingstone to be sympathetic towards a thriving and popular part of our community.

Gung Hey Fat Choy
Wishing you prosperity and wealth

SUSAN FLEMING

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Don't miss....

The Soho Community Centre Trust

SPRING FAIR

Bric-à-Brac
Stationery

Books and Toys

Grand Raffle

Barbecue and wine

Tea and Cakes

Saturday 30 April

12 noon - 3pm

The Community Hall, 55 Dean St, W1

Art in Soho

Living in the shadow of a history as hedonistic as Soho's, it is hard to escape the ghosts of Francis Bacon, Dylan Thomas, Jeffrey Bernard, Muriel Belcher, et al. Soho continues to be presented as the place for a good time, but the inference is that it *really* was something about 50 years ago, when all those culturally important people got tanked here. Nowadays, besides a little spot of location envy, most people living here are ignored. This column is in praise of someone who lives and works in Soho, but I think is hardly known elsewhere.

She's turned herself into

a living work of art, though she might not see herself like that. She's a perfect member of the local community in that when she gets to know you, she'll always have something pleasant to say and will impressively remember personal trivia. A friend of mine once reminded me that it is always a good thing to 'develop a look', and our subject has developed hers so consummately well that her liberal use of mascara and hair impart to both a baroque, gothic elegance. I know she's fond of Vivienne Westwood, but her appearance is so well choreographed that the grandest haute-

couture garments contribute to rather than overwhelm it. Her jewellery spans most major centres of civilization from the French Empire to the casbah and Indus Valley. She's a gorgeous, über-exotic self-creation who shows up those Soho celebs for the dull drunks they must have been. And she carries it all off with the true insouciance of one who genuinely couldn't give a toss. Like Athena springing fully armed from the head of Zeus, so she landed in Soho as an exemplar, style queen and living masterpiece.

DAVID GLEESON

MAISON
BERTAUX
28 GREEK STREET
SHAFTESBURY
AVENUE
LONDON W1



Salon de The

020 7437 6007



Twitcher

Well, dear friends, the buzz word this year from the Council is RECYCLE...Soon it will be mandatory that we separate our rubbish into colourful boxes or bags for multiple collection. I can't wait! Will these colour-coded boxes be strewn around our streets for us to fill, I wonder? Will we be expected to heave-ho up and down endless stairs with correctly filled boxes in the middle of the night, I wonder? How the Council will achieve this miracle is beyond my imagination as, collectively, we seem unable to aim anything at, let alone into, any bin in sight....Some of the tortured souls who do try and separate their rubbish are those folk

you see walking the streets with extended arms like orang-utangs from carrying their rubbish to the bins in Dufours Place; others are left gasping as the doughty men from Onyx heave all in sight into the crunching maw of their monster trucks. Since WCC have singularly failed to take up the imaginative option of installing an al fresco lavatory at the back of Somerfields, maybe this is the moment to suggest the Council may prefer to line the back and side of the supermarket with recycling bins in the hope that all us busy recyclers may put off those persistent pissers who are still at it, even in frosty midwinter.

Eureka! Two problems solved at once. Well, mes amis, we can only wait and hope...

A bientôt.

Newframes

25 Beak Street
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W1F 9RT

T 020 7437 8881
F 020 7437 8163

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