Opportunity beckons for Farmers Club

The Farmers Club has a once in a lifetime opportunity to acquire "the farm next door." Secretary Stephen Skinner explains

WHAT makes The Farmers Club special? Well, apart from its wonderful location, I believe its ethos and culture, created by past and present members over many years, stands out as an almost tangible and unique quality. Without it, the Club would not be what it is.

In the face of fierce competition from other Clubs and hotels we must jealously guard this special atmosphere. But, we should never forget the Club is still a business and must explore opportunities as they arise. One such opportunity, and a special one indeed, is now presenting itself.

Last year, I heard that the company leasing the accommodation on the end of our building (the MOD end), was looking to move out in March 2012. Fortunately, the managing director of this company is a member of The Farmers Club and was kind enough to show me around. What an opportunity revealed itself!

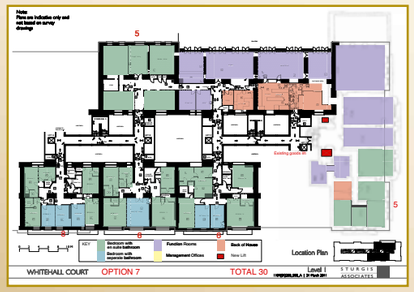
With 11,500 square feet of floor space spread over three floors, this is large by any standards and offers the Club, through clever use of the space, the ability to increase the number of bedrooms from 52 to 70; provide larger public rooms; add a sizeable balcony attached to our current one; and give us our own entrance. Our new address would be No 1 Horse Guards Avenue, just around the corner from where we enter the building now.

The space is exceptional. The entrance is special by any standards and already has a fit-for-purpose reception. The room we are intending to use as the dining-room will provide more space and light – an even better environment than we already enjoy. We will provide a larger business suite, essential given the demand we have been experiencing with our current one. The meeting rooms vary in size, offering us the chance to hold seminars or even small conferences, family gatherings and celebrations. As for the new bedrooms, ALL will be en-suite and fitted to the high standard we have been achieving of late.

If, and it is a big if, we are able to acquire the sub-lease and get planning permission, then the project would take at least a year to complete. Moreover, given we could separate reasonably well the works on 1 Horse Guards Avenue and 3 Whitehall Court, it is hoped there would be minimal disruption to Members, albeit, some must be expected. Given a fair wind, we should be able to occupy the new space in mid 2013 and have all the works completed by the end of 2013.

Lots more bedrooms, to the highest standard, like recently refurbished room nine (above)

(Above) Impressive entrance at No.1 Horse Guards Avenue



(Right) Clever use of space will offer members lots of extra facilities

More meeting rooms to meet customer demand

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The business plan to support this acquisition and development is near completion as I write. However, it is important that members appreciate that it is most definitely not our intention to raise prices to levels seen in neighbouring hotels. Our philosophy is to maintain value for money and thus prices will be comparable to that which you are paying now – allowing for inflation.

"Why should I be a member when I can't get a room when I need one?" Almost from the day I started three and a half years ago, this has been a constant refrain. The 'why' is pretty obvious. With excellent value for money, we enjoy one of the highest occupancy rates of any club in London and 52 rooms is not sufficient to meet the demand. We need more bedrooms.

The size of our dining-room and some of our meeting rooms is limiting too. There are frequent requests from Members to hold dinners, lunches, meetings for 50, 60 or more people and the truth is we struggle. Yes, we have managed up until now by judicious use of the connecting doors between the dining-room and Eastwood Room, but it could never be described as a 'neat' solution. The result? We lose out on opportunities that could generate invaluable income for the Club.

No 3 Whitehall Court is quite an entrance and once again, has served us well over the years. But it is shared with other residents and we have to rely heavily on the porters, who do not work for us. This is less than ideal. To have our own entrance with our own porters at night and receptionists during the day, controlling access and security, is, to my mind, a valuable and important asset – even more so as we look to the future.

Finally, in setting the scene, the eighth floor bedrooms, variously known as the attic or the crow's nest, were constructed in 1934 as temporary accommodation and have more than served their purpose. However, access to these rooms renders them unusable for less mobile members; there is only one bathroom to share among six bedrooms; and, the construction is most definitely showing its age. Its life is restricted for our future needs and members' future aspirations.

Naturally, we have explored the options for developing the eighth floor, but these are limited, not least because we can do nothing about the access. We should look to sell the sub-lease sooner rather than later while it still retains value.

After presenting the outline business case to the Trustees, they approved my taking it to your General Committee who approved the employment of the essential professionals to take this project forward. With chartered surveyors, quantity surveyors, architects, tax advisors, lawyers, surveyors, valuers, fund raisers and numerous others, we have, step by step, progressed and now have plans on how the space could be used, a detailed business plan and, are well into negotiations with the owner on an acceptable price.

Clearly, none of this comes cheap. Our intent is to raise capital through the sale of the eighth floor and fourth floor accommodation. But even then, we will still need to raise a lot of money through, it is hoped, the generosity of our members. I should say here that Mrs Stella Muddiman, whose late husband generously funded the purchase of our 4th floor accommodation, is more than content for this course of action.

The Chairman of Trustees and I will be writing to every member shortly on how we might look to raise the funds necessary to achieve this unique opportunity for the Club. If spread equitably among every member this would cost approximately £1500 each, although we naturally recognise that not every member would wish to contribute.

Of course, we are searching for generous benefactors and possibly even for companies that may wish to sponsor us in some way. Maybe people would like a room named after themselves or a member of their family? Whatever way we go, I know this will be challenging. However, I believe passionately that in the long-term, this is the right move for The Farmers Club. It will guarantee its future for many, many years to come, allowing it to grow and develop and serve its membership well in to the 21st Century, reflecting our confidence in farming and in the future.

I look forward to hearing your views and, I hope, gaining your support.