



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT
TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE CHELSEA SOCIETY
HELD ON 26TH NOVEMBER 2012

My Lord President, ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

This is the first occasion that I have had the privilege of addressing you on the affairs of the Society since my appointment as Chairman of the Council on 1st April this year. It was a daunting task being asked to follow such illustrious predecessors including, in particular, the immediate past Chairman, Stuart Corbyn, who stepped down earlier this year. He only had two short years in the post but without doubt he made an impact on the Society considerably in excess of the period for which he served as Chairman. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Stuart for all his hard work. I am of course delighted that he continues as a member of the Society, and retains a close interest in all matters pertaining to Chelsea.

And so my first few months in this role have been largely a learning process. I am not sure that I had formulated pre-conceived ideas of what I was taking on; I always think they are rather dangerous to the extent that they rarely are borne out by the reality of events. What I have, however, found is a Society in robust health and one that continues to implement the vision for Chelsea that arose from Reginald Blunt's original concept formed in 1927. I was rather intrigued to note that the very first Annual Report contained a reference to Sloane Square and controversy over its layout. Some things clearly never change.

One of my initial tasks was to assist the Council in appointing a new Hon. Secretary. It is a post that has been vacant for some time, and although the Assistant Hon Secretary, Patricia Burr and other members of the Council, valiantly and efficiently stepped into the breach, it was a post that clearly needed to be filled. I am delighted to say that we have now appointed Sarah Farrugia as the Hon. Secretary, and I have every confidence that she will prove to be most effective and successful as we strive to take the Society forward in the twenty first century..

In addition to Stuart Corbyn, the Council has also lost during the course of year two other members, Christy Austin (a former Hon Treasurer) and Giles Quarme. We are sorry to see them go but are immensely grateful to them for all the work that they did whilst members of the Council. We are delighted however to welcome Paul Aitkenhead as the newest member of the Council, and I have no doubt that he will prove to be (and indeed already has proved to be) and active and valuable member.

I am sad to report that two former members of the Council died during the course of the past year. The first was Quentin Morgan Edwards, a past chairman of the Council, and the second was Martin Andrews, who was a member of the Council in the 1990's. They were both very valued members of the Society and we shall miss them.

Sadly, I have also to report that our President, Lord Salisbury is standing down this year and, in consequence, this is his final AGM. We are immensely grateful for the work that he has done for the Society during his term of office and, in particular, the way that he has so effectively and courteously conducted these meetings. The difficult task of finding a worthy successor is in hand, and I hope to be able to report further on that in due course.

It has been another immensely busy year for the Society – the summer was of course dominated first by the celebration of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and, as a very significant part of that, the River Pageant, and secondly by the Olympic Games.

The Diamond Jubilee properly found Chelsea at the heart of many of the celebrations. There were street parties and royal visits and of course there was the extraordinary River Pageant. Cadogan Pier played a sumptuously prominent role in that event, and the streets of Chelsea, notwithstanding the weather, were brought alive with crowds coming to celebrate the Sovereign's Diamond Jubilee and to watch a spectacle the like of which none of us had seen before, and I think I can safely predict, none of us will ever see again. The weather may not have been kind to us (as indeed it was not for most of the summer), but it did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the enormous crowds watching a Pageant of a thousand boats in procession down the Thames.

We had hardly caught our breath from that before the Kings Road was filled once more with crowds to watch the procession of the Olympic flame. I do not think that any of us had the slightest idea of just how the mood of the nation would be caught by this extraordinary tour, taking the Olympic flame to all parts of the country. Of course we had the flame twice because not only did it pass down the King's Road, but it was also then taken down the River, once again passing Cadogan Pier, the Embankment and beyond. We then of course celebrated the Games themselves with the bicycle races passing up and down the Fulham Road with huge crowds watching. I am not sure how much the business community enjoyed all this because London seemed to be virtually empty during the period of the Games, but for the residents it was no doubt a blessed time.

Before all these National events, the Society had its Summer Exhibition, entitled "Chelsea – at the Heart of Gardening", formally opened by Felicity Kendal and which ran from 22nd May to 2nd June. By common consent it was highly successful, looking at the history of plant growing in Chelsea. We owe an enormous thank you to Carolyn Starren and her loyal band of supporters for setting up and running the Exhibition. I would also like to thank Leonard Holdsworth who in difficult financial times succeeded in raising substantial sponsorship in order to meet the cost of the Exhibition. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to show people what the Society is, and what we do.

Towards the end of the summer, we had the Chelsea Festival a marvellous celebration of the arts in Chelsea which the Society was delighted to support.

During the course of the year, the Society also had its usual selection of fantastic events which again give a real indication of what the Society can achieve and why it is so worthwhile.

This year, we have had three spring lectures and two autumn lectures.

In January the well-known Chelsea artist, Ken Howard, spoke about his work and the philosophy behind his paintings in a talk entitled "Inspired by Light". It was one of our best attended lectures with over 100 tickets sold.

In February, the landscape architect, Kim Wilkie, came to talk to us about design around the concept of garden squares in a lecture entitled "Garden Squares, Courtyards and Public Spaces". He was particularly interesting on his role as the landscape architect for the Chelsea Barracks development – if only all developers had the foresight to retain the likes of Kim Wilkie and appreciate the real importance of not only open but also cultivated space in an urban environment.

Franny Moyle had written a recent fascinating new biography of Constance Wilde, and she came to talk to us in March on "The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs Oscar Wilde". As recent events have shown, we are always intrigued by a scandal and it is apparent that the Victorians and Edwardians were just as good at them as we are.

There were two autumn lectures, the first of which took place on 1st October. Penny Olsen had recently written The History of the Sloane Stanley Estate – a landed estate comprising some of the western sections of the Kings Road and the Fulham Road – now much reduced in size through a combination of tax and extravagance but still a significant contributor to the life and character of that part of Chelsea. She talked to us about not only the history of the properties but also told the families behind the Estate. It was a fascinating evening.

Finally, we were very honoured that our President, Lord Salisbury, who is Chairman of the Thames Diamond Jubilee Trust, gave us a talk on 29th October on the Diamond Jubilee Thames Pageant. He took us through how the project developed from the drawing board to the majestic spectacle enjoyed by over 1.2m spectators on the ground and a television audience measured in billions. It is difficult to imagine how Chelsea could have asked for better exposure to the World than that particular event.

There were a number of other events during for the benefit of members.

In April we had a visit to the English Gardening School in Lots Road to see its new home following its move from the Physic Garden. It was extremely well attended, and we were shown around the School by the School's founder, Rosemary Alexander.

In June, our former Chairman, David Le Lay, hosted another of his famous walks. Members were taken around the Oakley Street and Glebe Place area of Chelsea. David gave an absorbing talk with special emphasis on the life, history and contribution to Chelsea of one of its more bizarre eccentrics – Dr John Samuel Phene. That is a name to which I will be returning shortly.

In July, the Society's summer drinks reception was held at the chapel in Brompton Cemetery. Almost a hundred members attended and again we were given some fascinating tours around the monuments of the historic venue, while enjoying one of the few glorious evenings of the summer. This event was substantially oversubscribed – showing the continuing enthusiasm of our members to attend these events.

Also in July there was the annual Doggett's Coat and Badge. This year there was a very substantial turnout – something I hope that we can build on in future years. Members of the Society turned out to cheer the contestants as they crossed the finishing line at Chelsea. For those of you who do not know this is a race for newly qualified Thames Watermen and Lightermen and was first contested in 1715. It is argued that in consequence it is one of the oldest continuing sporting contests in the world. Interestingly, this year's winner, Merlin Dwan was the fifth member of his family to win this severe test of sculling and watermanship over a course stretching five miles and four furlongs.

There are many people involved in the organisation of these events and lectures, and I hope that they will forgive me if I do not mention them all by name, but if I did so we would be here all night. I would, however, just like to mention Paulette Craxford, our Events Secretary, who with her team of helpers and supporters works long and hard, not only to organise these events, but also to make them run so effectively and efficiently on the day.

It is of course vital that we continue to communicate with you as our members, and the Council is determined over the next year to look at ways in which we can be more effective in doing this. It will certainly mean that we need to continue to embrace modern means of communication, and look at the ethereal world and the facilities offered by Facebook, Twitter and other similar means of communication.

It is vital that we continue to grow our membership. The greater the size of our membership, the greater our strength in being able to represent the views of those who live and work in Chelsea. Working with our tireless Hon. Membership Secretary Patricia Sargent we are in process of updating our membership records and you will shortly be receiving a form to complete to ensure that our records are up-to-date. We will also be seeking your views on the Society; what we do right, what we do wrong, what we are doing that we should not and we are not doing that we should. For anyone here this evening who is not a member and who cares about this extraordinary place called Chelsea, I urge you to become one. . For those of you who are members, I would ask you to set yourself the task of ensuring that each of you introduces one new member to the Society in 2013. I venture to suggest that is not an onerous request and it does not require an A level in mathematics to work out that, if every member introduced one new member in the year, we would double our membership.

At the moment, one of our most effective publications is the Newsletter, and I urge you to read the most recent edition of this fine publication, recently emailed to some of our members and shortly to be posted to all of you. Here I need to mention Michael Bach, who is largely responsible for producing the Newsletter. The latest edition is, without doubt, the best yet. This year we have produced two editions. It is disappointing that we have not managed more, but they do take an enormous amount of time and effort on the part of those who prepare them. Nevertheless, next year we are determined that we shall produce at least three Newsletters during the course of the year.

In addition, there is the Annual Report. One of the perks of being Chairman (albeit a perk that lasts only as long as the appointment) is to be allowed custody of a full set of Annual Reports going back to the year of our foundation, 1927. They are nothing less than a history of Chelsea and are

worthy of study for that reason alone. Carolyn Starren produced another brilliant Report in 2011. I am privileged to know what is coming in the 2012 Report and you may be absolutely confident that it will be even better. Carrie tells me that this year will be her last which I think is a terrible shame. I shall do my best to persuade her otherwise but just in case I fail, I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for all the work that she done over the years in producing this record of Chelsea life. For anyone who has ever had to produce a periodical of even a fraction of the quality of the Annual Report will know the pain and suffering that goes into ensuring that the completed publication appears on time and perfect. So Carrie thank you for all hard work and dedication.

I will also mention very briefly Carrie's work on the Society's Archive. Much of our precious records have now been moved to a new facility in Walpole Street and I am grateful to her for organising that. Also, one of the Society's most popular products is our cards; we owe as usual a great debt of gratitude to Hugh Krall for allowing us to use a number of his wonderful paintings for these cards.

Without doubt, the real engine room of the Society's work is related to planning matters. This year has been if anything more controversial than usual and there have been some major issues that we are having to deal with and further significant issues that will undoubtedly be arising in the near future. We are very fortunate in having a hard working and dedicated Planning Committee, chaired by Terence Bendixson, to ensure that the Society's voice continues to be heard on the issues of the day.

Without doubt, the issue that has in my view dominated this year is subterranean excavation or what you might otherwise call basement development. I was intrigued to learn from a recent article in the Guardian newspaper that over the past four years the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has apparently granted planning consents for more than 800 basement extensions, refused 90 and has a further 20 applications outstanding. As the article points out, we live in the most densely populated borough in the Country and, with little room to build upwards or outwards, the only way is down.

The problem is that despite what others might say, we really have very little concept of the implications of some of these enormous excavations. Probably the most infamous of these is Jon Hunt's application in Kensington Palace Gardens where he has proposed to dig a 22-meter deep hole beneath his garden to take a tennis court, swimming pool, gym, private museum for car etc. This may be exceptional in terms of scale, but the concept is by no means unique. More recently, Chelsea is having to face an application for a three-storey basement extension beneath the former Magistrates Court in Walton Street – in this case the basement is to feature a swimming pool, a garage, a ballroom and a gym etc.

It seems to me that there are really four main issues here.

First, we really do know very little about the implications of creating these enormous holes in the substrata of London. I appreciate that a few years ago the Local Authority did obtain from Ove Arup a report and their research showed that there was little to worry about in terms of drainage, which was primarily what the instruction was about. However, it does seem to me that we know very little about the implications for the structure of buildings directly affected by and in the vicinity of these developments.

Sometimes I have this vision that there will come a day when the whole of London (and in particular Chelsea) will simply sink by a number of feet in consequence all the holes that we dig. We are all very aware of the incident in Chester Row Belgravia a year or so ago when part of the roadway collapsed into the basement of a building where there was a subterranean development in progress..

Secondly, we have only a minimal idea as to the impact of these developments on the character of buildings, particularly listed buildings. Sloane House is a good example of a wonderful building where its entire character is likely to be substantially altered by the subterranean development that is going on there.

Thirdly, we need to be very conscious of the impact on open space and gardens where underground developments extend well into garden areas. Current rules indicate that up to 85% of garden space can be undermined, and it seems to me that this must have an impact on the future of tree and plant growth in the Borough.

Finally, you only had to attend the meeting organised by the Society for local Residents Associations to meet with Councillor Tim Ahern the RBK&C Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and his director of planning, Jonathan Bore, to appreciate the degree of pain and misery that is caused to local residents by the amount of work that is required during the development process. It is not like normal development. Many tons of earth needs to be excavated, and this leads to huge amounts of noise, dust and general nuisance. Large numbers of heavy lorries are required to remove the sub-soil and these need to negotiate the narrow streets of Chelsea. It was quite apparent from that residents meeting that the disruption to the lives of those people who live and work in this Borough is beyond acceptable.

To be fair to the Council, they are very aware of this problem and are taking some steps to deal with it. I appreciate that they are hampered by the bureaucracy of central government and by legal constraints. However, I think that we all hope that within the democratic process they will find away to deal with the very real concerns of the people who live here.

Your Society is working very hard to help with this process. We continue our dialogue with the Council on plans to strengthen their policy and we appreciate the opportunity to do that. We have been working with a group of Chelsea Residents and a team from the Royal Borough Planners and Councillors on a project known as Vanguard which aims to reconcile the desire to improve and enlarge homes with the impact that this has on neighbours and the need to maintain the special architectural character of the area. As I said earlier, we arranged the meeting between residents and representatives of the Council so that Councillors and their executives continue to be aware of the strength of feeling here and to do what we can to ensure that our concerns are properly addressed.

Another significant issue during the year has been the loss of public houses within the Borough. This has been a long term problem but the loss of pubs has reached a dangerous level in recent times, fuelled by the ever rising prices of residential property in London. There are enormous commercial pressure to convert public houses to residential houses where the financial rewards can be so great. The Society believes that the loss of public houses is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. The same point was made by my predecessor in his Report last year when he spoke eloquently about the loss of community space and in particular schools. In a rather gloomy prediction he did say that it would be a miracle if by now we had not seen the last pint served in the Cross Keys and in the Phene Arms. He expected that both would now be expensive private houses.

Well, it may not be a miracle but the battle to save these iconic public houses is far from over. I am delighted to say that we have had a significant support here from the Council. Public houses continue to provide a unique community feature within the area, and their loss generally must be resisted. It was a real triumph to win the planning appeal on the Cross Keys. We have recently completed planning enquiries on the Phene and on the Queens Head. We keep our fingers crossed for both of those. .

I would like to pay particular tribute to Terence Bendixson and his team (particularly Michael Bach) for all the hard work and effort that they have put in to these issues, and I hope that their success is properly recognised. At the moment, the Society is settling a paper to be presented to the Council setting out in forthright terms our views on this issue.

Of course in addition to the major issues, there continue to be general planning matters and the Society's Planning Committee works tirelessly to deal with these on a regular basis. I could go on all evening about the various planning issues that we have to deal with, and perhaps I could just mention one more – street apparatus. Large pavement cabinets for 4G equipment are in prospect and we face the possibility of having the red Gilbert Scott telephone kiosks turned into advertising hoardings and cash machines. Streetscape is important to the character of an area, and the Society will remain vigilant in staying true to its original objectives.

In addition, we have the usual and continuing issues of CrossRail, the major sewer project, the development of Battersea Power Station and the plans for Earls Court, all of which are likely to impact upon Chelsea in one way or another. How ever much the Government wants to bury its head in the sand in the issue, there will also be the question of our response to London's aviation needs and the impact of that on the residents and businesses of Chelsea. In order that we can ensure that all these projects are considered in the context of the aims and objects of the Society and their impact on Chelsea, we need your continuing support.

I very much welcome and applaud the greater openness and transparency on planning matters that we are seeing from the Council on planning issues and what I believe is a very real effort being made by them to consult and inform. I hope that other landowners will also feel encouraged to follow the recent example of the Cadogan Estate in consulting widely with all local stakeholders on major development projects on their Estate at an early stage of the development process.

So fear not overly for the future. The Society will continue fulfil its obligation to educate and provide a fascinating selection of events and lectures. We are in the process of having visits to the Watermen's Hall; there was I believe one last week, and another one later this week. We have Julian Barrow talking to us about Tite Street on 14th January 2013 and Dr Allison Smith discussing the Pre-Raphaelites in Chelsea on 18th March. There will also be a further lecture in February on a date and on a subject to be confirmed.

We are currently reviewing the Constitution of the Society to ensure that it is fit for modern purpose. As with most things, you cannot stand still; if you do, in reality you are moving backwards. Equally, however, we must never lose sight of the aims and objectives of the Society. We will continue to stimulate interest in the history, character and traditions of Chelsea. We will applaud good architecture, town planning and civic design, the planting and care of trees and the conservation and proper maintenance of open spaces.

We will seek the abatement of nuisances and we will continue to make representations to all the proper authorities on these various subjects. Our principal objective is to preserve and improve the amenities of this great Borough. I am sure that we can do better, but then there is never likely to be a time when I would not say that. What I can say, however, is that during my first six months as your Chairman, I have been singularly impressed by the work and dedication of those members of the Council (and the wider membership) who really care. Without doubt we can build on that and I intend to do so.

We are truly blessed here in Chelsea. We have wonderful architecture, stunning buildings, unique open spaces and one of the most iconic roads in the world. We have a world class theatre, a stunning gallery (now with over a million visitors a year) amongst many, a proper Arts Club, a wonderful selection of churches, schools, pubs, hotels, restaurants, cafes, shops, public and private gardens and a concert hall of true quality. We abut one of the great rivers of the world. We have a cricket pitch and tennis courts, cinemas and shops and a department store known throughout the land. And amongst all this, there are streets, roads, squares, terraces, walks, ways, closes, mewses and gardens where people live their lives.

All this creates a real community. It was Margaret Thatcher who famously said that there is no such thing as society. There has been considerable debate on what she meant by that; however, I do not think that she meant that there is no such thing as community. There is and we are all part of it, and for someone who spent so many of her years living in the heart of Chelsea, I do not doubt that she would have recognised that.

Of course, one of our primary objectives is to preserve and we must never lose sight of that. However, equally we are charged to improve the amenities of Chelsea. The Society is not and never has been against development per se. Let us face it, without development there would be no Cadogan Hall, there would be no Duke of York's Square, there would be no Saatchi Gallery and, to take it to extremes, much of Chelsea would still be open farmland.

However, when we view development, we must necessarily ask ourselves the question: is it encouraging good architecture, town planning, and civic design, the planting and care of trees and the conservation and proper maintenance of open spaces. There is necessarily a balance to be struck between the rights of individuals and the rights of the community, but it must be the role of the Society to represent the community. I certainly intend to use my time as Chairman to ensure that it continues to do that.

My Lord President, this is the Chairman's Report for 2012 in the Chelsea Society's 85th year.