

**CHAIRMAN'S REPORT**  
**TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**  
**OF THE CHELSEA SOCIETY**  
**HELD ON 25th NOVEMBER 2019**  
**AT CHELSEA OLD TOWN HALL**

The Worshipful Mayor of Kensington and Chelsea; Chelsea Councillors, Representatives of other Amenity Societies, Honoured guests, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I thank the Members of Council for their dedicated work. They believe Chelsea is worth fighting for, as enshrined in our principal Object: to preserve and improve the amenities of Chelsea for the public benefit.

The Society has had the immense benefit of long serving Council members, reminding us of our traditions, recalling our previous successes and putting our struggles into perspective. Our Constitution requires three members of Council to retire each year, though they may stand for re-election. This year two have resigned: Allan Kelly has been in charge of membership since 2015, coping with changes in data protection, Gift Aid and banking; Terence Bendixson was the Planning Officer from 2000, dealing with many contentious issues over a very long period, and in 2014 moved on to general Council matters with a focus on architecture; but even these long-serving Council members are newcomers compared to Jane Dorrell, who has been on the Council since 1980, editing the Annual Report and other Society publications. She has decided not to stand for re-election, after four decades of service to Chelsea. We are very grateful to all of them for the extraordinary contribution they have made over many years. All council members serve in an entirely voluntary capacity.

We want to give prizes to preserve and enhance Chelsea. We have a Chelsea Society Photography Prize; a Chelsea Society Essay Prize for primary schools; and in future a prize for architecture in Chelsea. We have also contributed to

the restoration of the Chelsea Physic Garden conservatories. Our policy is to enhance Chelsea, and build our membership in order to do so.

We have a generic problem in Chelsea: in a densely populated urban centre, every development has a considerable impact on us. Central governments are unwilling to legislate at a national level against the things that make our lives a misery: building works, demolitions, construction traffic, noise, and general nuisance. Currently, in my own house our capacity to think and work is being reduced by a builder's loud drilling on our party wall.

Worse, because property values in Chelsea are high (a function of central location and well-preserved amenity) any change would be seen as favouring a wealthy minority: not a popular policy in the eyes of the rest of the country. Our problems in Chelsea could shortly become their problems, but that is not clear to them at the moment. Although national legislation on development is what we need (for example, restricting number of building sites per street), we are unlikely to get it.

On a broader level, society in general is changing from written letters to social media, from voluntary associations to looser electronic networks, from owner-occupation to rentals.

Our street has changed since my wife and I came to Chelsea in April 1982. Then, we got to know most people, or at least knew something about every household. At that stage it was over 90% owner occupied. Now it is down to 40%. We have many renters, probably one Airbnb, and a few houses where we know nothing about the occupants. At least one rented house is in visible disrepair.

The Society must change in response, using more emails, websites and other media, while still keeping up printed mailings for those not on the internet; it must use more up to date systems and services, and pay for backroom operations for website management, book-keeping, and very probably membership accounts and direct debits and other activities. As announced last year, after a few years without any increase, the Council has decided to raise our membership rates by £5 which will help defray increased postage and operating costs.

Some members favour activism: giving stickers to drivers with idling engines; demanding that building workers have Identity Badges so that complaints can be specific, and workers without them challenged. Society members have

always been activists. Colin Davis, architect and streetscape designer, sent me the following from the Architects Journal for December 1956, page 407:

"Mrs Paul Reilly of the Chelsea Society prevented the replacement of unobtrusive and elegant street lighting in her Chelsea street by the simplest possible means - going out and protesting to the men who came with replacements. The men took them away again and haven't been seen since."

Chelsea continues to attract buyers who see houses as building opportunities ripe for demolition. Even when they are willing to keep the walls in place, they love ripping out everything else, particularly if it is almost brand new, to replace it with something similar, but in this year's colours. The most common sound from next door is often a pneumatic drill.

Standing up for residents against these developers are the members of the Society's Planning Committee, which comprises the Chairman Michael Stephen, Barrister and former Member of Parliament, and one member for each Chelsea ward. Sir Paul Lever, former diplomat and British Ambassador to Germany representing Brompton-Hans Ward; Martyn Baker, former senior civil-servant and adviser to the City of London Corporation, for Chelsea Riverside Ward; Jules Turner, a practising London architect, for Royal Hospital Ward - and Michael Parkes, (appointed last week) a retired Chartered Surveyor and Town Planner, representing Stanley Ward.

We have an excellent Planning Committee, and our website shows how much work this Committee does, including writing detailed position papers on key planning matters. They cannot deal with every individual planning application, but can concentrate on those with largest impact, and those which raise matters of planning principle which might lead to damaging precedents.

Regarding the Sutton Estate, after protracted battles we and other groups have won a considerable victory. There will be a renovation of the flats to bring them up to modern standards, for letting to social tenants. This was better than we expected, and a testimony to different parties working together in the public interest.

We helped save our Chelsea bus routes 11, 19 and 22, threatened with closure by the Mayor of London, and many members wrote to thank us for this.

We helped defeat an attempt to demolish 49 Cheyne Row and rebuild with a mega-basement as deep as the building was high.

We helped defeat an attempt to convert the Old Telephone Exchange in Mallord St into a 400-pupil school.

We are keeping a close watch on development plans for The Old Police Station in Lucan Place, and for Colebrook Court in Sloane Avenue.

We have published our views on the development proposals for South Kensington Station; we have contributed to the Council's Code of Conduct for Planning; we have appeared before the Council's Scrutiny Committee; we have contributed to the Council's Housing Strategy; and made detailed comments on the Council's Statement of Community Involvement in Planning.

On a matter of principle regarding social housing, we believe priority should be given to key workers who need to live close to their work, and more generally to those with real connections with the Borough. We have differing views on whether developers should provide housing on site, or in places where two or three units could be provided for the price of one in Chelsea, so we intend to have a debate about this next year to get your views.

We are urging strong enforcement of regulations covering building work and noise. We must speed up reporting systems so that residents can quickly report infractions and get them dealt with.

We have lost 56 extra-care places by the closure of the Council's Thamesbrook care home, and another 44 places at St Wilfrid's in Tite Street. RBKC promised a care home in the Lot's Road area, but building has yet to start, and would be on land earmarked as an employment zone. This is hardly optimal, and the delay is intolerable. We will continue to demand a prompt like-for-like replacement for Thamesbrook.

We continue to fight to maintain the look and feel of the Chelsea riverside.

Crossrail 1 has become an expensive joke. Estimates of budget and timetable for completion are less reliable than current electoral promises. Should Crossrail 2 ever be re-proposed for Chelsea we will give it a critical reception.

Space in Chelsea for our Summer Party has become very expensive. We are trying to control costs for our key events.

Lectures and events continue to flourish, thanks to Gaye Murdoch and Jo Thornycroft, and a growing group of helpers. They have become educational

and social events which showcase the Society, and have even made a small surplus.

In February Dr James Nye gave an entertaining lecture on the 18th century clockmaker Edmund Howard, of the Chelsea Clock House, near the Moravian Burial Ground, who made the clock for Chelsea Old Church.

Also, in February the Society publicised a panel discussion at the Chelsea Physic Garden of leading Sloane scholars exploring Hans Sloane's extraordinary life and his contributions to science.

In March we had a private visit to the Old Bailey, as guests of one of the Sheriffs of London. It was alarming to sit in the dock, and to find that the only thing provided for the accused was a box of tissues. Members sat in Court, and later some members sat in the cells.

In March Colin Sheaf, Deputy Chairman of Bonhams, lectured on Chinese Art. Next year he will be showing us the items for sale on the day before a Bonham's auction.

In April, architectural historian Alan Powers gave an illustrated lecture on Architecture in Chelsea from Peter Jones to the Present.

In May, three architects working in Chelsea showed photos, plans and models of a school, a private house and a home for the elderly, and were questioned by members.

Later in May we had an illustrated lecture at the V &A on the Chelsea Pottery works founded by Nicholas Sprimont in 1745, and then a tour of the relevant collection.

In June we had our Summer Party in the newly re-decorated Small Hall, where more than 70 members of the Society welcomed the Mayor of Kensington & Chelsea, Greg Hands MP, and other distinguished guests.

In July we had a Private visit to Lambeth Palace, London residence of the Archbishops of Canterbury for over eight centuries. Members took tea in the State Drawing Room, not normally open to visitors.

Later in July, on the hottest day ever recorded in England, we had the first ever cricket match between Raffles Club and the Chelsea Society, at the glorious Duke of York Square by kind permission of Lord Cadogan. We hope to make it an annual event.

In September we visited the American Embassy in Battersea, at the kind invitation of the Ambassador.

In October, arising from our architecture lecture, we had a private tour with the co-head teacher of Marlborough Primary School, seeing its imaginative internal spaces and outside areas for recreation and growing plants.

Later in October, a very well-attended Planning Committee meeting with Residents Associations and the Leader of RBKC, Cllr. Elizabeth Campbell, discussed planning issues raised by members and residents.

Later still in October we had a private guided tour by the Keeper of the Wellington Collection at Apsley House, which includes an enormous statue of Napoleon by Canova, and paintings by Lawrence, Goya, Rubens, Van Dyck, Caravaggio, Brueghel, Velazquez and other artists.

In all, we had 14 visits and lectures, all well attended, and providing a small surplus for the Society's funds. I thank all the speakers, and the audiences, who were knowledgeable and contributed to excellent discussions.

Compared to other charities, our financial reserves are relatively low, given our nine decades of activity. Most charities build reserves to help them maintain their activities in times of economic downturns. We have very low internal administrative costs, but voluntary posts are hard to fill. We are looking for a Membership secretary and a General Secretary, but if we cannot get volunteers, then we will have to pay for systems and services to cover the tasks.

You can now join the Society online, which cuts out the trouble of posting forms to us. We remain one of the country's largest amenity societies, with roughly 1,000 members. If you have changed your home address or email address, or your personal form of address, please let us know.

We are currently paying for book-keeping services, and have put in new systems which will save us money from now on. Cadogan Hall continues to handle our bookings free of charge, and we are most grateful to them.

We have enjoyed having Council meetings at Peter Jones, the National Army Museum and the Chelsea Arts Club. We thank them for this, and also Waitrose for contributing to the refreshments this evening.

Under the editorship of Dr Sarah Ingham, the Annual Report continues to flourish. I am most grateful to her and the advertisers who support us.

Amalia Cebreiro has guided us on social housing, and Fleur de Villiers is leading on the school prizes project. As a personal vote of thanks I am very glad that Chris Lenon has taken over from me as Treasurer.

Volunteers are most welcome, and do not have to join the Council. Talk to us over drinks later.

Those wishing to join the Society do not have to live in Chelsea, but just need to support our objectives. In some ways Chelsea is an attitude of mind: artistic, quirky and somewhat rebellious. Chelsea is not just its buildings, but mostly its residents.

I turn to a Chelsea Society publication of 1934 "The Story of a Flitting" about Thomas Carlyle deciding in 1834 to move from Craigenputtock in Dumfriesshire, down to London, in search of interesting people to talk to. Although Carlyle considered houses in five other parts of London, Leigh Hunt suggested a delightful house at 5 Great Cheyne Row. Carlyle wrote a letter to his wife back in Scotland, of which here is the concluding paragraph:

"Chelsea is unfashionable: it was once the resort of the court and great, hence numerous old houses in it at once cheap and excellent. Chelsea is a singular, heterogenous kind of spot, very dirty and confused in some places, quite beautiful in others, abounding with antiquities and the traces of great men: Sir Thomas More, Richard Steele, Tobias Smollett and others. Our Row runs out upon a beautiful Parade running along the shore of the river: shops, a broad highway, with huge shady trees, boats lying moored, and a smell of shipping and tar; Battersea bridge (of wood) a few yards off; the broad river with white-trousered, white shirted Cockneys dashing by like arrows in the long canoes of boats; and beyond the beautiful knolls of Surrey with their villages: on the whole a most artificial, green-painted, yet lively, fresh almost opera-looking business as you can fancy".

Jane replied: "is it not too near the river? I fear it would be a very foggy situation in winter, and always damp and unwholesome. And the wainscot up to the ceiling – is it painted? If in the original state hardly any number of candles (never to speak of only two) will suffice to light it. And another idea presents along with that wainscot – if bugs have been in the house! Must *they* not have found there, as well as the inmates "room without end"?

Arriving in London Jane looked at all the houses, and they moved into Chelsea three days later, staying for the rest of their lives. In his old age, Carlyle said that it was the finger of Providence that brought him to Chelsea. His house was a cultural centre, and among the many visitors were: John Stuart Mill, Erasmus, Darwin, William Thackeray, James Fraser, Robert Browning, Sir Richard Owen,

Sir Robert Peel, Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Ruskin, Thomas Huxley, John Millais and JM Whistler. So he had found people to talk to.

Chelsea has never been short of characters. Chelsea is unique, and we aim to keep it so. We like it as it is, and want any changes to be an improvement.

The Society will continue to preserve and improve Chelsea, to be enjoyed by all who live, work and play here. May it delight them all.

That ends the account of our activities, in this our 92nd year 2019.