



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT
TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE CHELSEA SOCIETY
HELD ON 25TH NOVEMBER 2013

Mr President, Vice-President, Members of the Council, Members of the Society and Honoured Guests.

It is my privilege to address you for the second occasion on the affairs of the Society, in what has been a very active year

Amongst our many distinguished guests I would like to welcome particularly two of our Vice-Presidents, the Mayor of Kensington and Chelsea Councillor Charles Williams and The Right Honourable Greg Hands MP, and also our Honorary Vice-President, David Le Lay. Our other Vice-President, Earl Cadogan, is committed elsewhere this evening but I would like to thank all our Vice-Presidents for their continuing support for the Society's work.

I would also like to say how very honoured we are that John Simpson CBE a most distinguished writer and broadcaster has agreed to become the Society's President. He and his family have had a long association with the Borough of Chelsea and we are delighted to have him to lead the Society over the next three years. Although I said a few words about our previous President Lord Salisbury at the last Annual General Meeting, I would like to say once again how much we appreciate what he did for the Society over the six years that he held office. It was a particular privilege to have him as our President during the year of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee where of course he played such a prominent role in the organisation of the extraordinary River Pageant.

I would also like to express my appreciation for the considerable work that the Council has undertaken during this most busy year. None of them receive any remuneration for what they do and yet they all work long and hard to ensure the success of the Society.

There have been changes to the composition of the Council this year and a number of long standing members of the Council have decided to retire. David Sagar had been a member of the Council since 1984; Dr Serena Davidson since 2002, Richard Melville Ballerand since 2003 and Andrew Thompson since 2005. They have all stood down from the Council this year and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for all their hard work and many years of service.

We were all deeply saddened when Julian Barrow, a member of the Council between 1986 and 1991, died in September this year. It was only a few months following a lecture which he had given to the Society on the history and character of Tite Street. He was a true friend of the Society and a long standing supporter and lover of all things Chelsea. There was not surprisingly an enormous turn-out for his service of thanksgiving held at St Luke's Sydney Street. We shall miss him greatly.

Patricia Sargent became the Hon Membership Secretary in 1989 and remained in that role until she retired earlier this year. She also decided to stand down from the Council. This Society exists and flourishes because of the dedication of those people who work tirelessly to achieve its aims and objects and there can be no better example of that than Patricia. We shall miss her greatly although I am delighted to say that she does of course continue as a member of the Society and has already provided terrific support to her successor.

With that in mind I am delighted to be able to report that Allan Kelly has agreed to become our new Hon Membership Secretary. One of the tasks of the year has been to bring our membership records up to date and to continue the work of transferring out membership records to an electronic database. I am immensely grateful to our Honorary Secretary Sarah Farrugia for helping to co-ordinate that with Allan. I am confident that our membership will continue to grow; we held this year in the summer a reception for new members which was seen to be a great success. We will I hope repeat that exercise this summer.

I told you at the last Annual General Meeting that I thought that the Annual Report for 2012 would undoubtedly be the best that we had ever produced. I was not disappointed and neither I think was the membership. Ever since the Society was founded in 1927 we have produced an Annual Report and they now form an essential element for anyone wanting to research the history of Chelsea. In every year since 1927 we had had a sober front cover with just the famous anchor embossed upon it with the date of the Report. In 2012 we made the decision to put photographs on the front cover, which included in particular a wonderful photograph of the Diamond Jubilee River Pageant. We waited with baited breath for the response of our members to this radical departure. Much to our relief we had only praise; it just shows that sometimes you can introduce change without it necessarily being bad.

I also expressed the hope in my last Report to you that Carolyn Starren the Hon Editor would be persuaded to produce the Annual Report for 2013. I am delighted to say that my powers of persuasion proved effective and she is doing so. I have no doubt that she will produce this year an Annual Report that will match the success of last year. Carrie works tirelessly for the Society and I thank her once again for her terrific contribution this year.

As usual, in 2013 we had a full programme of events, lectures, visits etc.

On 14 January 2013, Julian Barrow gave a fascinating and amusing talk about the history of Tite Street. He had lived there for almost 50 years and with his customary charm he delighted us with stories and reminiscences that brought to life many of the great characters who had worked and lived there.

On 11 February 2013 we were very lucky to have Bob Crouch, the Bargemaster to HM The Queen, to give us a fascinating talk about the history of the Thames. He covered 800 years of river life, from the signing of the Magna Carter in 1215 through to the events of 2012 and the spectacle of the River Pageant.

On 18 March 2013, Dr Alison Smith the co-curator of the exhibition “Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde” came to talk to us about the Pre-Raphaelites in Chelsea. Through her extraordinary knowledge she enthralled us with a talk which covered many aspects in the life and works of the various artists who lived in or were connected with Chelsea.

On 18 February 2013 we had the first of our visits which was to the Fishmongers’ Hall. The Fishmongers’ Company is one of the 12 great livery companies of the City of London and has enjoyed an unbroken existence for over 700 years. We visited the present hall which was completed in 1835. Probably the most famous of the treasures in the hall is the portrait of HM The Queen by Pietro Annigoni. Julian Barrow had studied under him in Florence and during the course of the visit we were treated to some wonderful anecdotes about the sitting and Annigoni himself.

We had an additional lecture on 3rd June 2013 to mark 100 years of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. The author Brent Elliott talked to us about what makes the Chelsea Flower Show so special. He explored how the show evolved from its earliest days to become the focus of international attention and a significant part of the social calendar of London.

On 28 June 2013 we had an opportunity to visit Masterpiece London. Members of the Society who came on the visit viewed a huge range of exciting artefacts in this remarkable international art fair. Following a private champagne reception the visitors were able to enjoy a lecture by the well-known designer Tim Gosling who spoke about his new book on the works of art from the chinoiserie rooms of Buckingham Palace.

The Summer Meeting took place on 5 July 2013 and we were privileged to be able to hold it in the wonderful State Apartments of the Royal Hospital. It was a beautiful warm evening and we had a terrific turnout to enjoy champagne on the south lawn with splendid views and convivial company.

On 12 October 2013 there was a visit to the Whitechapel Bell Foundry whose buildings date from 1670, four years after the Great Fire of London. It is extraordinary that we still have a working foundry in the middle of London and it is a great credit to the family which still owns it that they have preserved so much. Alan Hughes led the tour and his dry wit kept the members all amused whilst he imparted interesting historical facts.

Our final lecture for the year was on 21 October 2013 from Peter Murray, Chairman of New London Architecture. NLA is currently hosting an exhibition on the Great Landed Estates in London and we were very fortunate to have Peter Murray to talk to us about the role of the Great Estates in the development of London. Much of the story of the development of London since the Great Fire can be traced through these Estates, comprising as they do pieces of land based on historic ownership and shaped by ancient paths and buried rivers. Peter Murray looked at the lessons of the past and also how the Estates are run now, with the benefit of a long term approach and proven resilience. It was interesting how in less than a generation many of the Great Estates have turned from being villains to heroes, as they now focus so much more on heritage and community.

On 12 July 2013, members of the Society welcomed the contestants in the annual Doggett's Coat and Badge as they arrived at Cadogan Pier in Chelsea. As many of you will know, this race for newly-qualified Thames Watermen and Lightermen is thought to be one of the oldest continuing sporting contests in the world. This year, we were particularly honoured by the presence of Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal who was a guest at the Fishmonger's Company. They have been responsible for organising the race since 1721. My wife and I had the great honour of being presented to her Royal Highness, as did our Honorary Vice-President and former Chairman of the Council David Le Lay. One of the questions that was put to me during the course of the day was: "How do you define the boundaries of Chelsea?" I was reminded of the saying that: if you are able to walk down the road in your pyjamas and nobody bothers to look at you twice, then you know you are in Chelsea.

I would also like to thank Mrs John Everett who invited a number of Officers and Members of the Society on to her boat moored at Cadogan Pier for an excellent lunch, following conclusion of the race.

All these events have two things in common. First, they are wonderful examples of how the Society strives to fulfil one of its aims: to stimulate interest in the history, character and traditions of Chelsea. Secondly, they are all primarily organised by our Hon Events Secretary Paulette Craxford. I do want to take this opportunity to thank her and her team of helpers and volunteers who not only organise all these events but also ensure that they run smoothly and effectively.

This year for the first time we were very fortunate to have a stand at British Antique Dealers Association Antiques and Fine Art Fair when it came to the Duke of York's in the Spring. It was the first time that we had done that. Our presence there was a marvellous success and a great opportunity for us (which we took) to attract new members. Our Honorary Secretary Sarah Farrugia organised that for us but I would like to thank both her and the many helpers and volunteers who manned our stand over the days of the Fair.

We organised two further meetings during the year which are worthy of mention.

First, at the beginning of this month, we held the annual meeting of Chelsea Residents Associations with representatives of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. It is an opportunity for local Residents' Associations to raise planning and other issues which concern them. This year we were very fortunate in having on the panel the new cabinet member for Planning Policy, Transport and the Arts, Counsellor Timothy Coleridge and the Head of Development Management for RBK&C, Graham Stallwood. Despite a smaller audience than we had hoped for, a number of interesting and stimulating topics were raised (some of which I will come back to) and discussed. The Society is particularly grateful to both Tim Coleridge and Graham Stallwood for answering so fully all the various questions that were put to them.

Secondly, at the end of September the Society held a special meeting to debate the issue of Crossrail 2. The Small Hall at the Old Town Hall was packed for this debate. There is a summary of the debate and the issues discussed, in the Society's most recent Newsletter and I will not set that out again now. I would just say (and I will be coming back to this issue) that Crossrail 2 is in my view one of the most significant events to effect this borough in recent memory.

During the course of debate we heard from Richard de Cani from TfL, Counsellor Nick Paget Brown, Leader of the Council and Terence Bendixson the Society's Hon Planning Secretary all of whom kindly answered questions from the floor.

Before I look forward to next year there are one or two issues that I would like to pick up on from last year.

First I said last year that we would be asking our members for their views about the Society, what it does and how effectively it does it. This is always a somewhat nerve-wracking time but the response was beyond our expectations (and I would like to thank all those members that took the time to reply). We were pleasantly surprised by the approval rating that we had and also with the numbers that have offered help and expertise. The survey suggests that over 85% of members give us an approval rating of 8 or more when asked if they would recommend us to others. Over 90% of those who responded thought that we keep our members informed of the Society's activities either very well or well. The survey also shows enthusiasm by our members for the internet and modern means of communication. The Council is neither self-congratulatory or complacent by these results. However, we are encouraged that we are doing the right things, even if I am sure that we could always do them better

Secondly, I was determined that we should be able to communicate more effectively with our membership and at the same time speak to a wider audience to encourage non-members to join us. As part of this exercise, I was determined that we should improve our website. Quite simply, our present website is no longer fit for purpose. Indeed, given the changes in style and technology, in recent years that is hardly surprising. We have therefore decided that our website will be completely revamped and a new website will be launched hopefully by the end of this year. It will enable our members to access online information about events, obtain historical information, keep members up-to-date with local news and allow people to make enquiries. 75% of those whom we surveyed indicated that they would make use of the website. Sarah Farrugia has been working extremely hard on this over the last few months; she is here this evening and she will I know be happy to answer directly any questions that any of you might have about the new website and how it will work.

In addition the Society now has social media pages on Twitter @ChelseaSociety Facebook and LinkedIn. I know that many of you will be comfortable with social media and I urge you to keep in touch with us and communicate with us by using it.

Traditionally we have kept in touch through our newsletters, produced by Michael Bach. Our latest Edition (No 38) has just been published; a number of you will already have received it by email. Of course one of the benefits of the new modern website will be that we can impart information to you much more quickly and effectively. We will not be abandoning the traditional paper format of the Newsletters because many of you will want to continue to receive a hard copy.

I would only say that the cost of producing hard copies and the cost of postage is quite a burden on the Society and whilst not wishing to suggest that we would ever abandon the production of the Newsletter in a paper format, the more members who are prepared to accept it in an electronic form, the more the Society can save its precious reserves to help fight the many challenges that we will be facing in the future if we are to fulfil our primary duty to preserve and improve the amenities of Chelsea.

So what are those challenges? Last year, I mentioned specifically (1) basement developments (2) loss of public houses and (3) street apparatus, as the issues which had taken up much of our time. They all continue to be issues.

I also mentioned Crossrail 2. The proposal is for a new underground railway with the possibility of a station in the King's Road. At the moment there is no final decision on exactly where the line will run, where the stations will be or indeed whether it will be a small scale underground or a larger suburban railway. There is no doubt that a new underground is needed to relieve overcrowding on the existing transport system. However where it should go is something that we need to think about very carefully. RBK&C supports the principle of Crossrail 2 serving Chelsea but has serious doubts about a station next to Dovehouse Green. It would prefer to see the station further west – World's End or beyond. This was very much the view of the meeting that we had in September. TfL are currently looking at the options and they are likely to make a recommendation in Spring 2014. Whatever happens a new underground line and station in the heart of Chelsea will inevitably have a significant impact on the character of the area. The Society has already made representations to TfL on the siting of a new station and will continue to monitor developments.

The Brompton Hospital is the site of not only a hospital but also comprises significant land to the north (Fulham Road) and to the south, down to the Kings Road. The Brompton Hospital has decided to stay in Chelsea and that in itself is very good news. The plan however is for the Trustees to sell off the northern and the southern parts of its land holding and invest the proceeds in the central hospital block bounded by Sydney Street and Dovehouse Street. Of course significant value lies in the sites to be sold driven by the desire to build ever grander and more expensive houses and flats. However at the moment we have fine commercial buildings fronting the King's Road, the open space of the Farmer's Market and traditional mixed use buildings running north along Sydney Street. Behind the Fulham Road there is affordable housing. There is no doubt that it is of significant benefit to Chelsea that we are to retain the hospital here. That hospital needs to be improved and the funding for that can most obviously be found from the sale of other assets. What happens to the land that is sold is clearly of great importance to Chelsea and we must monitor that closely. I am glad to say however that the Society is a member of the working group that will advise on the shape of the new buildings and we will ensure that our views are heard.

The King's Road is forever changing – change is inevitable. But there are two major redevelopments planned – each of which affects the two remaining cinemas in the King's Road; the Curzon by Chelsea Manor Street and the Cineworld on the corner of the King's Road and Old Church Street.

In both cases cinemas are to be retained but they will be rather different from the cinemas that we have today. In addition, as part of the Curzon redevelopment, it seems likely that we may well no longer have a public house with a frontage on the King's Road. The final public consultation on this proposal takes place this week and I urge you all to attend and make your views known.

Very real concerns are understandably expressed about our housing stock in Chelsea. The land prices for homes within the whole of London (but perhaps most noticeably within Kensington & Chelsea and Belgravia) have risen to extraordinary levels and all the forecasters tell us that they will continue to rise. London has always been a cosmopolitan city and long may it continue to be so but in recent years we have seen a significant increase in the number of people buying houses here purely as a safe haven investment, without anyone living in them. That necessarily has an impact on communities. Communities exist because people engage with other residents, families, businesses etc. The character of an area is necessarily influenced by the community of people who live and work there.

I have no solution as to how one tries to control this phenomenon or indeed whether in reality one should try to do so. After all, the community that lives and works in Chelsea has inevitably changed over time and that must necessarily lead to a change in the character of an area. You have to accept that when residential property becomes an investment rather than a home then that will inevitably have an impact on the community.

The whole saga of basements is a particular example of this. Investors rarely stop to think about the impact on the community or the impact on neighbours by digging down. They are driven merely by what they see as the enhancement of the value of their investment and if that upsets the neighbours, well then, so-be-it. The Society has worked closely with RBK&C to try to control this and you can read in our latest Newsletter where we are with it. The Council is in the process of amending its policy to limit basement development and the Society has been very supportive of that. We would have liked the Council to have gone further but we appreciate the constraints to which they are subject. We do however welcome the Private Members Bill introduced by Karen Buck (MP for Westminster North) to limit generally basement developments on the same basis as the policy being introduced by RBK&C and the City of Westminster.

The closing of public houses is another example of where the desire of those who live and work in Chelsea to retain communities and the character of an area are simply subsumed by the desire for profit. Last year I expressed the hope that we would save the Phene and the Queen's Head; I am delighted to say that we did and that the Council's new policy on public house retention (which we worked hard to encourage) will shortly take full effect.

And then there is the issue of affordable housing. How can you possibly maintain a community and the character of an area if only the very rich can afford to live there? Historically Chelsea was a radical borough and we have a long tradition of providing social and affordable housing. Many of the great Victorian philanthropists (Sutton, Guinness, Peabody etc) built estates here that remain to this day. Council housing has been sold off so others now have had to step into the breach.

In the same way as the Brompton Hospital looks to fund the improvements to its buildings through the sale of surplus land, so Affinity Sutton are looking at the options for their site in Cale Street. They too are likely to sell at least part of the site for high value residential redevelopment whilst putting back the same number of affordable flats as there now are. Indeed, we are assured that whatever happens on the Cale Street site, there will be no reduction in the number of affordable homes. In the meantime, in order to better understand the issue, the Society has commissioned Gillian Best to produce a paper for the Society entitled "The History of Social Housing in Chelsea" with a view to tracing the development of social housing in Chelsea. We expect that Report will be available in the New Year.

There are of course many more examples of similar issues and proposals within Chelsea; many of them are referred to in our Newsletter which I urge you to read. In addition, there are developments outside the immediate Chelsea area which will affect us. Everything from the debate over London's airports to the Thames Tunnel, Chelsea Barracks, Battersea Power Station and new villages to be built in Earls Court, to name but a few.

So what should we as a Society be doing about all this? Our principal object is to preserve and improve the amenities of Chelsea. Of course on one reading it might be said that the objective to both preserve and to improve is difficult to reconcile. If you look at what has happened in the past I do not think that is so. To put it very simply our remit must be to try to preserve what deserves to be preserved and to try to improve what clearly needs to be improved. How do we judge that? Well our objects tell us that we are obliged to encourage good architecture, good planning and civic design and the planting and care of trees and the conservation and proper maintenance of open spaces. To my mind all those issues add up towards establishing the character of an area. Of course character is made up of other things too – the people who live here, the businesses that we have and the amenities that we enjoy.

Chelsea is unique. As I said last year we all live and/or work around the hub of one of the most iconic roads in the world. We have theatres, galleries, clubs, churches, schools, pubs, hotels, restaurants, cafes, shops, gardens etc all of which contribute to our community and all of which help establish the character of the area. Where we seek to preserve and improve our amenities we must always keep in the back of our minds the true character of Chelsea and what makes it the very special place that it is. We are not a Resident's Association; there are plenty of those in Chelsea who can promote the case for the residents of particular streets or wards. We have a wider brief and must ask ourselves the question: what is in the best interests of Chelsea as a whole; how do we preserve character and community whilst at the same time improving the amenities for all those who live work and visit this unique place.

Let me take as an example the King's Road. We should remind ourselves that what characterises the King's Road is its blend of "unique, arty, unusual, small, local, zany, and experimental" shops sitting between pubs, cafes, cinemas, libraries, homes and open spaces. If you take that away, it just becomes another high street and its character is lost. So in my view, when we look at the myriad of schemes and proposals that are likely to affect the King's Road over the next few years, we must not lose sight of that.

As I said last year, for the Society, the engine room of many of these battles is our Planning Committee chaired by Terence Bendixson. He has had another extremely busy year and I would like to express my appreciation to him and his team for all the hard work that they have put in. I am glad to say that the Society's voice continues to be heard loudly and effectively and I have no doubt that will continue to be the case as we meet these challenges.

So let us finish on a more positive note and look forward to some of the more enjoyable events that we can expect next year. There will be the usual set of Winter lectures in February and March and an Autumn lecture in October and we hope to arrange a number of visits to places of interest. The theme for next year will be Chelsea's association with the River; an extraordinary asset which I sometimes think we rather undervalue.

As I am sure some of you know, in 1829 the London publisher Samuel Leigh produced a panorama which depicted both banks of river Thames between Richmond and Westminster in one continuous painting. The work covers about 15 miles of the Thames and is about 60ft in length. It was very popular in its day and since its publication this panorama has become a valuable record of the late Georgian riverside. A project is now underway called "The Panorama of the Thames" which will bring Leigh's panorama into the 21st century by creating a contemporary version, showing the Thames riverside, as the great river takes its course through Greater London from Hampton to Tower Bridge. It will follow the River as it meanders along 26 miles of water – 52 miles of riverside – and will provide details of the main features and buildings on the riverbanks. This information is being provided by local groups from each of the riverside communities. Our contribution to this marvellous project is being headed by David Le Lay.

So our three winter lectures will be a talk on this great Project, a return visit by Bob Crouch to tell us more about the history of the river and Chelsea and a talk on Artists and the River. There will also be visits with a river theme.

We hope to have a stand again at BADA. There will be the Summer Meeting in June and Doggett's Coat and Badge in July. However, I suspect that there will be one event that may dominate our year and that will be our Exhibition.

The Society's Exhibition for 2014 will be entitled "Chelsea in the Great War" and will take place in a marquee at Duke of York's Square between 2 and 16 June 2014. It will look at the impact of the Great War on Chelsea, its residents and businesses. There will be five display areas within the marquee covering (1) Recruitment (2) The Home Front (3) Life for Chelsea Residents (4) Chelsea Arts Club goes to war and (5) "Lest we forget". There will be an interactive component to the Exhibition with PowerPoint presentation based on the five sections. It is hoped to have a number of early evening events in the marquee during the run of the Exhibition. The Exhibition promises to be a very special event.

Mr President, this is the Chairman's Report for 2013 in the Chelsea Society's 86th year.