



Chairman's Report to the Annual General Meeting of The Chelsea Society

Held on 23 November 2015

Mr President, Vice-Presidents, Members of the Council, Members of the Society and Honoured Guests. It is my privilege to address you once again on the affairs of the Society on what has been another very active and some may say challenging year.

I wanted to start by expressing my thanks and appreciation for the time and effort that the members of the Society's Council dedicate to the affairs of the Society. I would remind members that the Council receive no remuneration for their efforts and we rely wholly on people who are prepared to give up their valuable time for the benefit of Chelsea, to pursue vigorously the Objects of the Society.

I am delighted that Terence Bendixson, Michael Bach and Jane Dorrell have all been re-elected to serve as members of the Council. It also gives me great pleasure to welcome as our newest member Dr James Thompson who has just been elected today. All our elected members of Council are firmly rooted in the history and traditions of Chelsea and I know that they will play an active role in helping to secure the future of Chelsea by promoting our principal Object; to preserve and improve the amenities of Chelsea. We are allowed to have 12 elected members of Council; at the moment, the elected members number 10. Perhaps next year, as a demonstration of the commitment of our members, we could aim to have more candidates than spaces.

At the beginning of this year Nigel Stenhouse's term as Vice-Chairman of the Society came to an end. Nigel has been a member of Council for very many years and was Vice-Chairman for some 20 years. He has contributed enormously during his period of office to our work. I am delighted to say that, in order not to lose his knowledge and skills, the Council wisely decided to co-opt him as a member following the end of his term as Vice-Chairman. Sarah Farrugia was elected as Vice-Chairman of the Council having previously been the Hon Secretary. I would like to thank Sarah for the fantastic support that she has given to me over the past year. In addition, she has done substantial work towards improving our communications both with our members and with the wider audience, through our excellent website and also Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. In addition she has arranged surveys, focus groups, meetings etc. – more of that later.

Sadly, owing to other commitments, Lindsey Kennedy has decided to stand down as the Hon Secretary in the New Year; we are actively looking for her replacement. I thank her for all her hard work and support during her time with us.

I am afraid the same is also true for our Hon Treasurer Tom Martin. Looking after finances is always a thankless task so it is right that I should publicly express my appreciation for all the work that Tom has done to keep our finances sound and our books in order during his term of office. In addition, the other support that he has given to the Society through his office in Walpole Street is greatly appreciated. He will be difficult to replace.

I reported to the AGM last year that Terence Bendixson was standing down as our Planning Secretary. At the beginning of the year the Council appointed Michael Stephen to become our new Chairman of the Planning Committee for the Council. It was accepted that the volume of planning work is considerable and requires the input of more than one person. There are four Wards within Chelsea and it was agreed therefore that we should appoint a representative from each of the Wards to deal with the more localised planning issues. The larger or more significant planning matters would be considered by the Committee as a whole and the most significant issues would be referred to the full Council.

This is a system which we think will work well, particularly in so far as there will be local representatives for local areas who will be able to listen to what the residents, businesses and other stakeholders think.

Our Membership Secretary Allan Kelly has done remarkable work over the year and continuing to expand our membership. We now have over 1,100 members. Alan works tirelessly to promote the Society, not only through expanding our membership but also by regularly volunteering to help at many of the Society's events. During the course of the year, we held receptions for new members, to introduce them to members of Council and also for volunteers, without whom the Society would find it virtually impossible to function. I hope we can repeat those next year; we seem to have attracted an extraordinary influx of new members over the last few weeks, many of whom may well be here this evening. I welcome you all and am delighted that there are so many new enthusiasts wanting to further the Objects of the Society.

Next year's new members party should be quite an occasion. Our Events Secretary Paulette Craxford has continued to play a huge role in arranging the numerous events which members attend and which are such an important part of our Objects. I will look at those in a little more detail shortly. We continue to look for a new Editor – as ever the plea goes out from the Council for members to put themselves forward for this role – but I am immensely grateful once again to Sarah Farrugia who is standing in that role for this year to enable us to produce our Annual Report. For all of you I have not mentioned individually, I can but apologise; it is no reflection on your contribution to the work of the Society which is enormously appreciated. I thank you all.

We have as usual had a very full programme of events, lectures, visits etc. On 2 February David Le Lay, our Hon Vice-President, former Chairman and a retired architect gave another brilliant lecture. This time it was on the history of the four 18th Century houses which were built on the banks of the Thames between the Physic Garden and the Royal Hospital. The lecture, which was fully attended, was called "The Riverside Houses of East Chelsea". The lecture built on papers that David had previously written and had published in the Annual Report. This was followed on 23 February by a talk from Peter Matthews of the Museum of London. He gave a lecture entitled "The Story of London Bridges" which looked at the history of bridge building in London and considered how without them London would not have grown. The lecture illustrated how the bridges and the city evolved from the first stone London Bridge to the high tech crossings of today.

On 23 March Amy Concannon, Assistant Curator for British Art at Tate Britain, returned to give us a lecture on the later life of JMW Turner. Amy told us how Turner's later years were a period of exceptional creative flowering. The last 15 years of his life saw Turner produce some of his most famous works.

The lecture explored this extraordinary period of Turner's life, paying particular attention of his link with Chelsea, where he made his final home.

On 21 April the Society had a visit for members to Merchant Taylor's Hall. Merchant Taylor's Hall has been on the same site since 1347. The entire hall was burnt out in the great fire in 1666 and then later rebuilt. Owing to its enormous popularity, the tour was repeated twice; on 21 July and 14 September. The Society is immensely grateful to the Merchant Taylor's Company for accommodating these tours. On 21 May the Society crossed the border to enjoy a visit to 18 Stafford Terrace in Kensington. From 1875 this building was the home of Punch cartoonist Edward Linley Sambourne his wife Marion, their two children and their live-in servants. The preserved house gives a fascinating insight into the personal lives of the Sambourne family and also provides a rare example of what was known as an "aesthetic interior" or "house beautiful" style. The building has been immaculately preserved.

On 30 June we held the Society's Summer Meeting at Petyt Hall next to historic Chelsea Old Church, a true landmark of Old Chelsea. In what was fortunately a beautiful warm evening we were able to enjoy the lovely secluded courtyard garden. There was a good turnout of members (indeed, it was a sell-out) and we were particularly delighted that the Mayor and Mayoress were able to join us. Doggett's Coat and Badge took place this year on a Saturday, being 1 August. Members of the Society welcomed the contestants as they arrived at the finish at Cadogan Pier. This year was the 300th anniversary of the race and those watching were treated to the spectacle of a very close finish. 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 and it is right that the Society, as one of the guardians of the traditions of Chelsea, should continue to play a role in it.

On 1 September, the leading Thames archaeologist Dr Fiona Haughey conducted a guided walk entitled "Explore the Foreshore" which was full of extraordinary facts about the history of Chelsea and the river. Many unique historical and archaeological items have been found on the foreshore at Chelsea over the years although none were I think discovered during the visit on 1 September. One particular historic item is the skull known as "Chelsea Man" thought to be nearly 4,000 years old which shows the earliest evidence for surgery in London. We hope very much that further walks can be arranged for next year.

Between 28 September and 3 October the Society was honoured to host in an unoccupied retail unit in Cadogan Gardens an exhibition of the artwork of Hugh Krall entitled "The Changing River at Chelsea". Hugh, an architect and artist who lives near the Thames in Chelsea has been painting and drawing the river for very many years. The exhibition showed how the riverside area in Chelsea has changed over the years. Hugh has been a loyal and valued supporter of the Society over very many years and his generosity in allowing us to use his pictures of the riverfront for the Society's greeting cards is enormously appreciated.

On 21 October the Society had a visit to Apsley House which stands in the heart of London and is the former home of Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington. Originally designed and built by Robert Adam in the 1770s the house was bought by the Duke in 1817. Although the house was given to the nation in 1947 it still remains in the Wellington family townhouse.

Our autumn lecture was held on 23 October. Gillian Best had been commissioned by the Council to prepare for us a report on the history of social housing in Chelsea. It is perhaps not entirely understood by many of those who now live in the best parts of Chelsea that for many years there were great swathes of Chelsea that were little more than slums.

It was perhaps for that reason that some of the great Victorian philanthropists of the day Peabody, Guinness, Sutton and Lewis all chose Chelsea as one of their initial locations to build major Estates and housing for the poor. Those Estates survive to this day and remain a crucial part of not only the affordable housing stock but also of the heritage of Chelsea. Gillian presented her report to a packed audience in the Small Hall of the Town Hall – it was literally standing room only. It was a fascinating lecture to enable us to learn how there is still much of Chelsea that provides essential housing for what our politicians refer to perhaps rather demeaningly as “ordinary people”. The future of this housing is constantly under threat from Government interference and commercial ambition.

I make no apology for setting out these events at some length. First, it is the duty of the Council to report to the members of the Society on those activities that we have undertaken as part of our obligation to fulfil our Objects. Secondly, and I shall return to this subject in a moment, the first of our specific obligations is to stimulate interest in the history, character and traditions of Chelsea. I think it is not co-incidental that our esteemed founder Reginald Blunt chose to place this at the top of the list. As so many have said, in order to plan for the future you need to understand the past. All these events fulfil our Objects and I am proud of them. I am also extremely grateful to Paulette who dedicates an enormous amount of time and energy to setting up and arranging all these events. She does have a team of helpers and volunteers (without whom incidentally the Society would not be able to function) but she is the Events Secretary and is therefore deserving of the credit for another full and fascinating year of events.

Looking ahead to next year, we will have another exciting programme of lectures, events and visits details of which in due course will be announced on the website and circulated to members. Without doubt, our biggest event next year will be the Society’s 2016 Exhibition to be held on Duke of York Square in June. The exhibition will be entitled “Royal Chelsea” and will look at the history of royalty (in its broadest sense) in Chelsea. Camilla Mountain and her Exhibition Committee are already hard at work in putting together the event.

It is fair to say that for much of this year, our second objective to encourage good architecture and town planning and civic design has been dominated by the toxic issue of Crossrail 2. Shortly, there is to be proposed a Resolution to this AGM that the Society should oppose both the construction of a station in Chelsea and to route the Crossrail line through it. In June 2014 the Council took a decision in the context of the then Consultation Paper issued by TfL that it would give conditional support to a station in the King’s Road. That decision was made on the basis of the information then available. Subsequently a considerable amount of further information about the plans for Crossrail 2 has become available. Furthermore, forceful and substantial opposition to the Crossrail project passing through Chelsea has come from both many local residents and businesses. In consequence of that, the Council felt it appropriate that it should look again at the cases for and against Crossrail 2 coming through Chelsea in order to be able to respond to TfL’s further Consultation Paper that was issued last month.

Within the last few months therefore members of Council have held meetings with representatives of “No to Crossrail”, RBK&C, TfL and the Cremorne and World’s End Residents Associations. We have in addition had many other informal discussions with other Residents’ Associations and individuals. Shortly, this meeting will as I say be asked to consider a Resolution to oppose Crossrail 2 in Chelsea.

The Council felt it appropriate that we should know the result of the vote on that Resolution before 7 we come to a final decision; it is therefore the intention of the Council to meet shortly following this meeting so that we can formulate our formal response to the Consultation Paper. The views of members will, I have no doubt, play a significant part in that decision. Of course one of the many questions that we have to ask ourselves in relation to Crossrail 2 is: What will be its impact on the character and traditions of Chelsea?

Chelsea is unique. It has extraordinary mixed and integrated communities. It comprises a number of villages or communities who all have that one thing in common: they live or work in Chelsea and are proud of it. At its heart is the King's Road: still unique despite the onslaught of change and still managing (just) to retain that quirky irreverence that makes it so different. We may not have lions living in flats anymore but you will still meet a man on a bus with a live and talkative parrot on his shoulder or find Lady Godiva in her full lack of regalia walking from Whistler's Statue to the Chelsea Arts Club.

We are absolutely right to worry about whether an underground station in the heart of Chelsea will irredeemably change that, even if many of you will not be here to know the answer. But we must not lose sight of the other threats that we face in order to safeguard this unique place. The loss of social and affordable housing, something which this Government seems intent on pursuing or at least not addressing, is likely to have an impact on this place very much sooner than some of these invasive infrastructure projects. If you talk to the residents of Sutton or Cremorne or World's End they are proud to be part of the community of Chelsea and are desperate to remain so. However, they are fearful of their futures and worried that their communities will be destroyed in the pursuit development.

Several of the Estates have wonderful open spaces; areas that can always seem tempting for construction. The Society opposes the loss of any precious open space. The Society also opposes any loss of affordable or social housing and we will not support any scheme that fails to adhere to this principle. Indeed, what we need in Chelsea is, not more investment opportunities for millionaires but, homes for the diverse mix of people who presently make up the community of Chelsea. As many of you will know, the plans by Sutton for the redevelopment of their Estate in Cale Street have now reached the stage of a validated planning application. It has only very recently been published but the Society's planning committee will look at the application very critically and will not support it unless we are convinced that, not only does it embrace good architecture, town planning and civic design, the planting and care of trees and the 8 conservation and proper maintenance of open spaces but also that it provides accommodation of no less a quality and at the very least for no fewer numbers that were provided by the original Estate; not incidentally the Estate following the removal of many residents but the full Estate.

The Society has written to our MP Greg Hands about the Government proposal to offer "right to buy" to Housing Association tenants and to fund this misguided policy by the enforced sale of Council housing. We will continue to make our voice heard on that issue. I will mention briefly one or two other significant issues. There are many more but I cannot in the time available cover them all.

The scheme for the redevelopment of the Curzon cinema site in the Kings Road was controversial, involving as it did the potential loss of a unique cinema and a pub frontage on the King's Road. Having objected to the original scheme, the Society was subsequently part of the discussions with Cadogan over a revised scheme to retain the cinema and the pub frontage which enabled us to support that revised scheme when it was resubmitted for a planning consent. The acquisition by the Metrobank of the prominent site on the corner of King's Road and Sydney Street is a bitter blow to those of us who oppose the prospect of King's Road becoming simply another High Street.

It is I am afraid an unfortunate consequence of government dictats on planning policy over which we have little or no direct control. All I can say is that our planning committee member for that ward Patrick Baty has worked extremely hard to try to moderate the visual aspects of the plans. We are assaulted on all sides by major infrastructure projects which, although in many cases not directly affecting us, nevertheless have an impact on Chelsea. There is Thames Tideway Tunnel, Counters Creek Storm Relief sewer proposal and the prospect of a third runway at Heathrow to name but a few. On our boundaries we have the development of Chelsea Barracks and in due course the prospect of Chelsea Football Club expanding Stamford Bridge.

South of the river, high rise developments continue to grow and we have to look at them. There are Conservation Area reviews and a constant stream of Consultation Papers from RBK&C on many aspects of life in Chelsea. We are suffering further endless disruption of the 9 King's Road by the National Grid's project to enhance the gas main in Chelsea. This is likely to continue for some time (it is a 5-year project); the list is really endless. I mention these issues by way of example because it is sometimes suggested that the Society spends far too much time on lectures and visits and far too little time on planning. I reject those criticisms. A great deal of our work on these issues goes unremarked and largely unnoticed by a wider audience. The work is not glamorous; it is often a bureaucratic grind, looking at lengthy planning applications, with their statements, specifications and drawings. I am grateful to the hard working members of our Planning Committee who commit their time and expertise to deal with these issues on a daily basis.

There are also some who suggest that we do not listen to our members. Well I refute that too. At the beginning of this year we thought it would be helpful to develop a paper to provide guidance on our planning policy, to enable us to respond yet more effectively to the various planning issues that we face. Michael Stephen worked extremely hard preparing this paper and it went through many drafts, with inputs from many members of the Council. Last month, the paper was published in draft on our website and we held a meeting at the Town Hall on 2 November to hear the views of, not only our members but also other residents, business owners and stakeholders in Chelsea.

We wanted the discussion to cover art and culture, local businesses, retailers, demographics, education, the environment – all the important issues that affect Chelsea as a place. We had a number of excellent presentations from our members and others on these topics. It was an opportunity for us to hear the views of our members.

Furthermore, before that conference, we had held meetings with many parties who were concerned with these issues; we convened focus groups to tell us what residents/families/businesses and others think about Chelsea, how they see the future and what role they think the Society should play in seeking to influence that future. We conducted an on-line survey to find out what people think is important about Chelsea, what we are proud of and want to retain and what needs to be improved. Much of this was organised by our Vice-Chairman Sarah Farrugia and she did a fantastic job.

It is our intention that these meetings, discussions and presentations should in future become a regular feature of Society business. 10 So what did we learn from all that? Interestingly, a recurring theme in the responses was: distinctiveness. Chelsea has its own distinct style and character and it was apparent that many people feel that we are losing that character, sense of identity and the quirky irreverence that we have come to enjoy and see as integral to Chelsea. There is a feeling that the King's Road is becoming bland and unrecognisable from many other high streets, that the onslaught of development not only interrupts daily life here but also reduces the essence of the place in terms of character and interest.

People are concerned that the level of overseas investment without residency is impinging on the area which is being dumbed down by those who have no affinity or concern for the way of life here and the heritage and special nature of the place. People are concerned that the future will bear little resemblance to the past. In many ways these are concerns about values and traditions – that the fabric of the place transcends the ordinary and should be prized and protected above all else. It is difficult to disagree with any of that. The only point I would make is this. Change is inevitable and will happen. There is much that will happen here over which we simply have no control; the influx of money and the interference by central government being two of the most obvious examples. So what we have to do is to try to manage change and in so far as it happens to ensure that to the best of our ability, we ensure that any change fulfils our obligation to preserve and improve the amenities of Chelsea.

Our website is a mine of information and we communicate through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. One of our most hard-working volunteers Sally Everest does much work here to present the Society in a format fit for the 21st century. We publish Newsletters for our members, both on-line and in hard copy. Our Newsletter Editor Michael Bach produces those and they are full of information concerning issues affecting Chelsea. I am grateful to Michael for all the hard work that he puts into producing those. Of course, it is always easy to criticise the work of others; even, sometimes to be ungracious or hostile. The Society would love to do more but we can only match our capabilities to our resources. Rather than stand on the outside and criticise, why not come and join us; volunteer to help and contribute to the work of the Society.

As I said earlier, it has been a pleasure to see so many new members joining the Society in the last few weeks; I shall look forward to meeting you all and learning about the contributions that you can make to our work. 11 So you will see why I do not accept the suggestion that we do not listen and we do not communicate. Of course, we can always do better and with your help I am sure that we will do so.

There are two Resolutions on which you will be asked to vote this evening. I have already mentioned briefly the first one: Crossrail 2. The second Resolution is more fundamental insofar as it proposes radically to alter the Constitution or Rules in the Society to the effect that the policy of the Society on a significant issue involving 750 square meters of proposed infrastructure or what is described as other major construction development can be determined by the members and not by the Council. This proposed amendment is unanimously opposed by all members of the Council. In order to appreciate why that is so, it is necessary first to understand what is the nature of the Society and how its Rules presently operate.

The Society, which is a registered Charity, was formed in 1927 with the principal Object to preserve and improve the amenities of Chelsea. The Constitution sets out four particular areas which are required to promote. First, we are required to stimulate interest in the history, character and traditions of Chelsea. I have already made the point that I do not think that it was accidental that this was listed first. Secondly, we are to encourage good architecture, town planning and civic design, the planting and care of trees and the conservation and proper maintenance of open spaces. Thirdly, we are to seek the abatement of nuisances. Fourthly, we are required to make representations to the proper authorities on these subjects. The principal role of the Council is to fulfil these Objects; it is thereby responsible for the day to day work of the Society.

The Constitution gives the Council power to take any action on behalf of the Society which the Council thinks fit in order to further the Objects of the Society. Every decision that we take has to be on that basis. Members of the Council are chosen, at least in part, for their expert knowledge and experience of matters which are relevant to the Objects. The primary purpose of the Council is therefore, not to represent the views of the members (unlike for example a Residents' Association), but to promote the Objects of the Society. Members become members of the Society because they share the same objectives. So it is the Council that is required (and has been required since 1927) to take decisions on behalf of the Society. There is nothing unusual about that; that is how charitable Amenity Societies are constituted. Nevertheless, the members ultimately have considerable power.

Their most important safeguard is the power to elect the members of Council. It is the case therefore that, if the members believe that the Council is failing in its duty to promote the Objects of the Society, then they can get rid of them. It is as simple as that. The members also have the power (as we see today) to put a Resolution before the Society. It would be a brave (I would say foolhardy) Council that chose to disregard a Resolution that is passed by the members, provided of course that the Resolution was in respect of an issue covered by the Objects.

The Council take the view that the amendment in the second Resolution is being proposed today is both unnecessary and unworkable. The amendment is unnecessary because the members already have the power to get rid of the Council and, as is being amply demonstrated today, they also have the power to pass Resolutions at General Meetings. The amendment is unworkable because, with great respect to the intentions and motives of the proposers, it has not been wholly thought through and its full implications have not been appreciated. What this amendment proposes is that, in relation to these major issues (which are not incidentally defined) the Council's power to take decisions will be removed and passed to the members.

The only precondition to that is that a minimum of 10 members of the Society (substantially less than 1% of our present membership) can “draw the Council’s attention” (whatever that means) to a major issue (who decides?) and at that point it will be for the members to decide the issue by ballot. A ballot is a process of voting which needs to be in writing and in secret. At the moment, there is nothing in the Rules to cover the conduct of a ballot. There is no indication in the amendment as to who is to determine what question is to be put to the members but on each occasion that this procedure is invoked it would require the printing of ballot papers and circulation of those papers to all the members setting a date for their return and then a count.

During this period the Council has no power to take any action because that power has been removed. So it is not difficult to see that any 10 members could remove the Council’s ability to respond to a major issue simply by invoking this procedure. It is not difficult to envisage a situation where one might see several groups of 10 members asking for different questions to be put. 13 It is for these reasons that the Council is unanimous in its view that this amendment should not be made. Its effect, in my opinion, is potentially to emasculate the Society from being able to take a decision on a significant issue.

I will finish by making my annual appeal for those who care about the future of Chelsea to consider joining the Council. I have made the point before that we still have fewer elected members of Council than spaces available. We are continuing our search for an Editor whose principal duty is to collate and publish the Society’s annual report. In addition, we are looking for a new Secretary and a new Treasurer. We have a constant need for volunteers to help with events, the website and social media, liaising with local schools, selling cards and publications, answering historical questions, maintaining our archives and generally promoting the Society.

The only qualification you need to have is to love and care about Chelsea. If you have that qualification please be in touch with Sarah. Finally, I want to thank you all for your continuing support of the Society and the work that we do. We could not do it without you. We are facing challenges but this great Society has survived since 1927 and I have no doubt that it will continue to fulfil its role to champion the preservation and improvement of the amenities of Chelsea for many years to come.

Mr President, this is the Chairman’s Report for 2015, in the Chelsea Society’s 89th year.