



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE CHELSEA SOCIETY

HELD AT 6.30PM ON MONDAY 20th NOVEMBER 2017

AT CHELSEA OLD TOWN HALL

Mr President, Madam Mayor of the Royal Borough, Vice-Presidents, Members of the Council, Members of the Society, Chairmen of other amenity societies and Honoured Guests.

I thank the Members of Council for their dedicated work over the past year. They believe the future of Chelsea is worth fighting for, as enshrined in our principal Object: to preserve and improve the amenities of Chelsea for the public benefit. First, I will turn to former members of our Council.

David Le Lay, who died in January was our most notable and long-serving Chairman, combining architectural skills, deep historical knowledge and an abiding enthusiasm for Chelsea. Good-humoured, impishly funny and extremely hard working, he kept the Society going, both with public speaking and behind the scenes management. His lectures on Chelsea's history were exceptional. The whole Society is in his debt, and will long remember him.

Paul Aitkenhead, appointed in 2012, died in May after a long illness. He was a collector of antiquarian books and umbrellas, and at home his collections took precedence over his own personal comfort. In the last weeks of his life, he was making suggestions for the better management of the King's Road.

Nigel Stenhouse, appointed 1989 died suddenly on 16 October. He had been Vice-Chairman for 20 years. It is largely to him that we owe the restoration of the Chelsea Embankment involving the cleaning of the granite wall, restoration of lighting columns, reinstatement of benches, and York stone repaving: a major achievement.

Two Members of Council have completed their years of service and decided not to stand for re-election:

Patrick Baty was in charge of Planning for Stanley Ward. An international expert on paints and colours, Patrick's book "The Anatomy of Colour" published this summer, is a beautiful and definitive work on heritage paints. The demands of his many clients, not least the Royal Household, have drawn him away from us. We thank him for his great contribution.

John Doncaster, with his long service to the Society has also decided not to stand again, and we thank him for his contribution.

No retirements were needed at this AGM because the Constitution requires that 3 of the elected Council members retire, and in fact 3 have already done so during the year.

Chelsea is vibrant, and part of that vibration comes from perpetual building work. The vast open-air strip mines of Kazakhstan seem quiet and dust-free in comparison. Facing this motorized onslaught is the Society's Planning Committee, which comprises its Chairman, Michael Stephen; Sir Paul Lever covering Brompton and Hans Town Ward; Martyn Baker

covering Chelsea Riverside Ward; Chris Lenon covering Royal Hospital Ward, and now Laura Carrara-Cagni covering Stanley Ward.

Our website shows you how much work this Committee does, including writing position papers on: the Raynsford [Planning Law Review](#), The Mayor of London's Transport Review, [Business Rates](#), Airbnb, [Basements](#), [Congestion Charging](#), [Repeated Planning Applications](#), [Launderettes](#), [Residents' Parking](#), [Privatisation in Planning](#), [Offices to residential without permission](#), [Right-to-Buy for Housing Association Tenants](#), [Garden Squares](#), [Very short-term lets](#), and [Cycle Quietways](#).

The tragedy of Grenfell Tower has made us look again at fire safety, Tenant Management Organisations, and central Government funding of council housing obligations.

The Society's work on Social Housing reveals that philanthropy in Chelsea antedates the welfare state. Peabody 1870, Guinness 1891, Sutton 1912, Samuel Lewis 1915: all these trusts made a permanent contribution to Chelsea life, and their legacy is worthy of preservation. Our position on these trusts is uncompromising: their assets in Chelsea should remain in Chelsea, as their founders intended. On the Sutton Estate, we have registered our implacable opposition to any reduction of social housing in Chelsea.

Social housing represents 24.5% of total housing in RBKC: slightly above the London average. You would not know that from most media reporting on Chelsea.

This October, in the aftermath of the Grenfell fire tragedy, we began debating the principles and priorities of social housing. Should priority be given to larger families with low income, or to key workers in hospitals, schools and other public services? Should priority be given to new arrivals who have no real connection with the borough? Should social housing be permanent, or withdrawn if circumstances improve, or if renters cease to be local key-workers? Should developers provide housing on site, or in places where three units could be provided for the price of one in Chelsea?

When we have drafted out the main questions, we will consult you on priorities. Despite the expertise of Council members, we don't know precisely how central government recompenses local councils for the cost of their statutory duty to house everyone who turns up in their borough. Apparently, neither does RBKC.

As regards Planning Law, our submission to the Raynsford Review recognises that property owners are free to develop their buildings, subject to restrictions in the public interest. However, we think that planning law does not attach sufficient weight to the local people who are affected by development.

It is often impossible for residents to live or work in their homes for many months or even years. Developers are rarely personally affected: they usually live elsewhere. Earlier this year one of our members died, after being subjected to noise, dust, vibration and intolerable stress caused by a development next door for which the Local Planning Authority had been obliged to grant planning permission. Hundreds of residents have suffered far more than they should be expected to endure.

We are urging changes in the law, and strong enforcement of regulations covering building work and noise. At a meeting with us last week Deputy Leader Will Pascall agreed to make Chelsea the pilot scheme area for a new enforcement regime to be launched next Spring.

We are not happy, to put it mildly, with what has happened to Thamesbrook care home. Formerly we had 56 beds in central Chelsea where older residents could be cared for and easily visited by family. Now all we have are glossy brochures, asking residents to pay millions for concierge outings and spa treatments. RBKC has promised us a care home on Lot's Road, but there is no date for the commencement of works, and no confirmation that the funds will be available. We understand that Grenfell has depleted Council finances by a reported £275 million, but we will continue to demand a like-for-like replacement.

The proposal to have large residential houseboats on Cadogan Pier was alarming. We opposed it, and it has since been withdrawn. Clearer policy and guidance on the Thames Policy Area (a London Plan designation) through a supplementary planning document is required.

Continued Article 4 protection for business and retail premises is vital if employment space in the Borough is to be saved from high-end housing.

We maintain a watching brief on Crossrail 2. Although it seems likely that the station at Chelsea will be dropped for purely financial reasons, we would welcome RBKC accepting that it makes little sense, and is not wanted by a majority of residents. Currently, the only assurance we have from the Leader of RBKC is that if a Chelsea station were to be proposed again, there would be a further consultation.

Turning now to our own finances, under our Treasurer Michael Illingworth we have carried out a detailed review of our costs, for which I am most grateful, and found that producing and mailing the Annual Report, Newsletters, and Notices of events and was taking up all of member's subscriptions. We have reduced costs by increased use of email, but we are still committed to mailing out the Report and the Newsletters to all members, and mailing out notices of meetings to those without emails. After leaving subscriptions unchanged for a long time, we have had to make a small increase this year.

Our well-attended lectures and visits have provided a small surplus. We maintain reserves to cover any legal costs on planning issues, and to carry out charitable ventures such as exhibitions. Our internal administrative costs have always been at an absolute minimum. The motion requiring a change in the Constitution has been withdrawn, because on further examination the Charity Commission guidance on payments for services covers any future need to pay for book-keeping services, but we would welcome volunteer book-keepers to assist the Treasurer. Our meeting locations are provided free by the Hampshire School, National Army Museum, Sloane Club, and others have offered. We thank them, and also Waitrose for contributing to the refreshments this evening.

I thank our Membership Secretary, Allan Kelly, for all his work, particularly dealing with the complexities of direct debits, standing orders, Gift Aid and those ancient devices: cheques. We remain one of the country's largest amenity societies (1075 members). If you have changed your postal or email address, please let us know, to ensure that our records are up to date.

I thank Michael Bach for the production of our Newsletters, which are always very informative and well received.

Dr Sarah Ingham is the editor of the Annual report, and under her guidance it has been a great success. We have been able to attract new advertisers, and are grateful to them. Sarah is preparing a special 90th edition for next year, which promises to be memorable, and I am most grateful to her. We have a deep history as an amenity society, and our Annual Reports are an important local historical record.

I thank our Secretary, Jennifer Grossman, who has been dealing with Society affairs whilst also living surrounded by building sites, and has a vivid understanding of how perpetual building work has impacted her family life.

Amalia Cebreiro has guided us in the social housing debate, and Terence Bendixson, Fleur de Villiers and Jane Dorrell have helped us newer Council members with many matters, and my thanks to them all.

Volunteers are most welcome, and do not have to join the Council. Consider it a zero hours contract, where even an hour helping at a lecture would be appreciated.

It is part of the Society's purpose to innovate, and that takes time.

Members chose the King's Road Fire Station for our Architecture Prize competition. I wrote to the Fire Service (long before the Grenfell fire) and they eventually answered that they would prefer us not to use their site as an example, in case it raised expectations which they would later be unable to fulfil. We are researching other sites. Meantime, we will be inviting architectural practices to discuss their development plans with us, and to understand our views.

Next year we intend to join the Sketch Club at their traditional dinners, now that they are no longer under legal threat from a neighbour because of their lusty singing of the national anthem. We helped them negotiate with RBKC noise department. The Sketch club lost its income for many months, and spent a great deal of money on legal advice, one reason why every charity should always hold a reserve.

We hope to take a look at the Cabman's shelter on the Embankment near Albert Bridge, to see whether we could take it over and preserve it.

A Cricket match is planned for June next year: a one-day tournament between the Society and other London clubs. Every team will have one celebrity and one woman, (not always the same person). Our Vice-President Damian Greenish is giving advice, and our President will participate again, despite, as he says, almost dying after the match last time. It is great to see him fit and well with us tonight.

Last year a Member asked whether the Society Lectures would continue, and I assured her that they would. As an innovation: lectures do not have to be about Chelsea, but about anything which interests members.

Having said that, the first lecture and musical evening in January, drawing about 50 people, was about Chelsea composer Peter Warlock. Distinguished organist Malcolm Rudland give the talk and accompanied tenor Danny Gillingwater's singing of Warlock's songs.

Backstage visit to the Royal Court Theatre in February, looking at the intricate arrangements required to stage plays in a restricted site, and yet innovate and take risks with new dramatic work.

City of London walkabout also in February with an architect who has done restorations and new City buildings, who gave a guided history of 40 years of development.

In February we became Chelsea Artists at the Sketch club, which involved the delightful task of sketching a live nude model, which seemed to have scared off many Members. We will run it again, with more emphasis on teaching sketching.

Also in February Andrew Ginger was interviewed by Peter York about his book "Cecil Beaton at Home", covering Beaton's lavish interior designs, and his influential photographic portraits.

In March Peter York interviewed Andreas von Einsiedel on "A Photographic record of Chelsea", including his record of Julian Barrow's Tite Street studio. This lecture led to Andreas making a photographic record of the Sketch Club.

In April RBKC Planning Director Mr. Graham Stallwood, and Cllr. Tim Coleridge gave a clear explanation of the 18 material considerations to mention when objecting to planning applications, and the 12 non-material ones which won't get you anywhere. It is all on our website, and worth the subscription fee on its own.

In May Cllr. Warwick Lightfoot, explained how the Council collects, spends, and invests our money: the first time anyone had asked him to do so. I learned that the annual cost of rubbish collection for each house was roughly £55.

In June, a Council member of the Society and former Ambassador to Germany, Sir Paul Lever, was interviewed in front of about 100 people by Council member and military historian Dr Sarah Ingham about his just-published book "*Berlin Rules: Europe and the German Way.*" Brexit negotiations have proceeded as Sir Paul predicted: Berlin rules, even though Mrs. Merkel might not.

Our Summer Party in July was attended by 120 members, our best attendance in recent memory. It took place at the luxurious Masterpiece exhibition, and allowed members to inspect the enormous range of fine art and high-quality exhibits. The setting and ambiance was a great success.

The fully restored 1968 bespoke Riva Aquarama Lamborghini powerboat, the one with the two Lamborghini engines, caught my eye, but my reasonable offer was not sufficient to secure it for Chelsea Society summer outings on the Thames.

In September the Society held its annual residents meeting together with the King's Road Association of Chelsea Residents. This was very well attended, with roughly 100 residents present. The two new Deputy Leaders of RBKC, Cllrs. Pascall and Taylor-Smith, explained their new responsibilities and answered questions.

On 9th October at another very well attended meeting, Commodore A.J.C. Morrow, the last Captain of the Royal Yacht Britannia, gave us a lecture about the ship, showing the private interiors and describing life onboard.

On 30th October Council Leader Elizabeth Campbell described her plans for the future at a large meeting, stressing the need for a culture change in the Royal Borough, and a greater degree of consultation, which we welcome.

Finally, earlier this month, Prof William Ayliffe, one of the world's most experienced ophthalmologists, gave a marvellous lecture on the *Iconography of Blindness* looking at how the blind have been depicted in world art over the past 2,000 years.

I thank all the speakers, and especially the audiences, who were knowledgeable and contributed to excellent discussions. In all there were 14 events, more than one a month - not bad considering we did not have an Events secretary, though Gaye Murdoch is about to join us. We are meeting with her soon to plan next year's events.

Finally, on 11th December the Society is holding its 90th Anniversary Dinner, where the guest speaker will be Professor Robert Tombs, author of "The English and their History" in which he describes how our history and the stories we have told ourselves have shaped us. Rather mischievously we are holding this dinner at the Caledonian Club! Book the remaining places via Cadogan Hall Box Office.

I am often asked whether members wishing to join the Society have to live in Chelsea. No. You just have to support our objectives, and have an interest in Chelsea. Where are the boundaries of Chelsea? Conventionally, the four Wards, but in cultural terms we use the John Betjeman criterion: "You know when you are leaving Chelsea when people start staring at you just because you're wearing pyjamas."

Betjeman's housekeeper used to accost late night diners coming out of Zianni's with the heartfelt request: "Quiet please: the Poet Laureate is trying to sleep."

Chelsea is a delight. There are so many connections between all the people who live and work and visit here. Yes, it is a village, but one which is known across the world.

One of the delights of Chelsea is to meet two Dames of the acting profession in one day, and then chat with one of them again in the Peter Jones chinaware department. This is the same Dame who told me triumphantly, after coming out of the Brexit referendum: "I voted Communist".

A resident who was on greeting terms with the novelist, the late Anita Brookner recounts this very early morning exchange on a near-deserted summer King's Road:

Resident: "Good morning, Miss Brookner, and what an exceptionally bright and sunny morning it is."

Brookner: "Quite so. And passing Markham Square I heard a fox cough."

Indeed, I think that Chelsea is the sole place in which our President can report to camera without wearing a flak jacket.

Chelsea is unique, and we aim to keep it so. We like it as it is, and if there is to be change, we want that change to be an improvement.

The Society will continue to work for the public benefit of Chelsea and its community. We will continue to preserve and improve it, to be enjoyed by all those who live, work and play here. May it delight them all.

That ends the account of our activities, in this our 90th anniversary year. Mr President, this is the Chairman's Report for the year two thousand and seventeen.

Dr James Thompson
Chairman

