

**REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN, DR. JAMES THOMPSON,
TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
OF THE CHELSEA SOCIETY
HELD ON 30th NOVEMBER 2020
By videoconference**

Mr. President, Mr. Mayor of Kensington and Chelsea; Member of Parliament for Chelsea, Chelsea Councillors, Representatives of other Amenity Societies, Honoured guests, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen.

2020 has turned out to be the most extraordinary year since the Society was founded 93 years ago. We would have to go back to 1918 to find a comparable epidemic, but even at the height of the Spanish flu, when the death rate exceeded the birth rate, Chelsea kept going, and crowds of over 20,000 watched football matches. We cannot compare our travails to those of Chelsea residents being bombed in the Second World War, but even in those dreadful times people were able to visit each other and be supported by the community.

For the very first time, our AGM is by videoconference, and health restrictions made us cancel all the meetings, lectures and interesting visits that we had arranged, and have restricted those impromptu everyday interactions which make Chelsea such a special place to live. We have had material comforts but a poverty of conviviality.

After a brief summer of normality we have been locked down again, and face further restrictions, which may increase in scope and severity. We hope not.

So, my first thanks are to our members for rallying round, and for attending our virtual meetings and events. In some ways it has been even more friendly this way, because we have all been able to see members at home and admire their bookcases, paintings and furniture. We have even commented on their haircuts.

I also thank the Members of the Council of the Society for their dedicated work in preserving and improving the amenities of Chelsea for the public benefit.

Our Constitution requires three members of Council to retire each year, though they may stand for re-election, and I am delighted that Martyn Baker, Fleur de Villiers and Amalia Cebreiro are willing to continue serving the Society.

We have decided to give prizes to preserve and enhance Chelsea and to encourage interest in its history and its geography. We have a Chelsea Society Photography Prize which we give in collaboration with celebrity photographer and Councillor Alison Jackson; a Chelsea Society Essay Prize for primary schools which Fleur de Villiers has organised; and in future a prize for architecture in Chelsea. Our policy is to enhance Chelsea, and to strengthen our membership in order to do so.

Pandemic or no, the desire to rebuild Chelsea continues, and some owners see houses almost as mere business opportunities. A catastrophic accidental demolition occurred at Durham Place on 2nd November, when two houses undergoing building work in a very fine 1790 terrace collapsed overnight. Mercifully no-one was injured or killed, but there could easily have been casualties.

The Royal Borough were quick to contact us, to explain what they knew so far, and to answer our questions, and Officials of the Health and Safety Executive are presently conducting an inquiry which will determine the cause of the disaster. The two houses which collapsed were not having a basement dug beneath them, though they were digging to extend a lower ground floor, and a basement had just been completed next door. Permissions for other basements have also been granted in the same terrace.

The Chelsea Society has urged that new basements and major building work should stop until the causes of the collapse are known, and we would urge much greater scrutiny of the design and execution of structural works, especially in terraces, where work on one house can affect the structural integrity of the others.

National legislation allows owners to appoint their own building inspectors from an approved list, which was the case in this instance. There may be no reason in principle why an inspector employed privately should be any better or worse than one employed by the Council, but we think that this issue should be revisited.

Some of us think that living in Chelsea is like living on a building site, so my personal message to present and future owners is: why not take a good look before you buy a house in Chelsea, and just enjoy living in it?

In May this year, after sterling work over 5 years, our Vice Chairman Michael Stephen retired from his Chairmanship of the Planning Committee, and I thank him for the very high standard of his closely argued reports, written with a skilled Barrister's eye, on all planning matters. He has been succeeded by Sir Paul Lever as Chairman, and Sir Paul remains the Committee member for Brompton-Hans Ward. The other members of the Committee are Martyn Baker, for Chelsea Riverside Ward; Jules Turner for Royal Hospital Ward, and Michael Parkes, for Stanley Ward.

We have an excellent Planning Committee, and it is the engine room of our Society. They cannot of course deal with every individual planning application, but must concentrate on those with largest impact which raise matters of planning principle or which might lead to damaging precedents. Our constitution requires us to serve Chelsea, not individual members, and to look to the long-term public interest, but we do attach considerable weight to the views of our members and we encourage anyone who seeks help from the Society to become a member.

To our great dismay, the Royal Brompton Hospital has resurrected plans to move to a site south of the river. The timescale is unclear, but there is a risk that they will try to sell off their existing premises for development. The Council of RBKC, with the Chelsea Society's support, is preparing a Supplementary Planning Document for the site, which would ensure that if the hospital moves (which we hope it won't) the site would remain substantially in medical use. You can contribute to the document by using the link we have placed on our website. Our vision had always been that all our local hospitals and medical research institutes would form a Chelsea Medical Campus, to create a unified centre of excellence in our Borough, and we are meeting with Council officials tomorrow to bring previous work on this concept to their attention.

Crossrail 2 is formally in abeyance, though not definitively cancelled. TfL still refuses to confirm publicly whether it has abandoned the idea of a King's Road station, though we believe that this is the case, and much of the land in the vicinity is therefore still subject to planning blight. Some of the money earmarked for the project has already been used to continue to run the tube system. For once, a decision which makes sense.

We have objected in common with the Brompton Association and others, to a very unwelcome application for the redevelopment of South Kensington Station; we have also warned that the increasing mass of some proposals for King's Road developments risk the road becoming a canyon; and we have pointed out that the government's new housing policy targets are unachievable in our densely populated borough.

We continue to demand a like-for-like replacement of care home beds which we have been promised since the Council's Thamesbrook home was closed.

We continue to fight to maintain the look and feel of the Chelsea riverside. We have participated in the Conservation Area Appraisal, and at our request RBKC has served a statutory notice on the owners of the Cabman's Shelter near Albert Bridge requiring them to restore it to its proper condition.

Events

The only visit we were able to carry out this year was to Vintners' Hall in March which included an excellent tour by Guy Fairbank, a blue badge guide and Vintners' Member. We had to postpone visits to the Garrick Club, Bonhams auction rooms, the College of Arms and the JP Morgan art collection, but we hope that these can take place in 2021.

On April 27th we had our first Zoom event for members, a lecture by Jonathan King, late of the British Museum, honorary fellow at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. He spoke about the Ranelagh Gardens and the Rotunda and the entertainments provided there.

On 29 July we had a Zoom lecture by General Sir Adrian Bradshaw former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander of NATO forces in Europe on "Current Security challenges facing NATO and the UK." Sir Adrian is now Governor of the Royal Hospital Chelsea.

On 1st September Emma Matthews, a Blue Badge Guide, and former Barrister took us on a virtual walk around the Royal Courts of Justice, the Inns of Court, and the other legal landmarks of London.

On 29 September we had one of our best-attended lectures, about the Chelsea Physic Garden, and many questions were asked by our members.

We are now working on a collaboration with Waterstones in which authors would give us exclusive presentations of their new books.

I would like to thank Gaye Murdoch, who worked against the odds to organise these events. She spent many hours tracking down opportunities, and dealing with logistical difficulties.

I thank all the speakers, and the audiences, often 40 per lecture, who were knowledgeable and contributed to excellent discussions, and I would welcome suggestions from members for future virtual lectures.

There was also an event of a very different sort. Our Society will always remember those who have done so much for Chelsea and for our country, and on Remembrance Sunday this year we laid a wreath at the War Memorial in Sloane Square.

As you will have heard from our Treasurer, we are in a good financial position, probably the best in our history. We are spending some money on prizes, but we are determined to build up our reserves so that our Society can ride out any storms and meet any challenges in the future. We also now have a paid administrative secretary, Clare Agertoft, and a paid book-keeper, Aaron Smyth.

We remain one of the country's largest amenity societies, with almost 1,000 members. This year we distributed introductory leaflets to Chelsea residents to recruit more members, and may do so again. We still get callers telling us that "the Chelsea Society ought to do something" and then admitting that they aren't members. Help us explain to them that they can strengthen the Society by joining through our website, whether they live in Chelsea or not.

Under the editorship of Dr Sarah Ingham, the Annual Report continues to flourish, and I am most grateful to her and the advertisers who continue to support us, even in these difficult times. I am also grateful to the Vice-chairman for producing a Spring and an Autumn Bulletin, and for managing the website and our presence on Instagram.

Volunteers are always welcome to help the Society in any of our activities. They can give as much or as little time as they like, and they do not have to join the Council.

Our troubles this year are nothing like those our ancestors faced in the Black Death of 1348, the Great Pestilence that carried away a third of the European population, as described by Boccaccio in *The Decameron*

In Florence, some thought that moderate living and the avoidance of all superfluity would preserve them from the epidemic. They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick, eating the finest food and drinking the best wine very temperately, avoiding all excess, allowing no news or discussion of death and sickness, and passing the time in music and suchlike pleasures. Others thought just the opposite. They thought the sure cure for the plague was to drink and be merry, to go about singing and amusing themselves, satisfying every appetite they could, laughing and jesting at what happened.

I leave you to judge which is more in keeping with the spirit of Chelsea.

I think that our current travails have taught us how much every community depends on the simple pleasures of human contact, of the warmth of chance encounters, of friends seen and waved at across a street, and of the comforting reassurance of familiar places. Our Society is here to gather us together in whatever way possible to strengthen the spirit of both people and place, and to remind us of all those who have lived here before us.

Chelsea is unique, and we aim to keep it so. 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 2020, in this the 93rd year since the foundation of our Society.