

**REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN, DR. JAMES THOMPSON,
TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
OF THE CHELSEA SOCIETY
HELD ON 29th NOVEMBER 2021**

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

2021 has seen us come blinking out of our burrows to breathe in the fresh air of a new dawn, but we keep looking over our shoulders in case we have to run for cover once more, feeling that we may be called back at any moment because of violating our parole. The threat is omni-present.

We have reconstituted our events and our face-to-face meetings. It is good to see you in the flesh, if you can remember what that feels like. We want to shake hands, hug sometimes, and always meet and talk and maintain our sociability, and drink together. Our Society thrives on connection, and we must strengthen those links between us.

Some things have not stopped. The urge to demolish and rebuild Chelsea continues apace, and many want to do major changes just short of demolition, risking or achieving building collapse. Although a year has gone by, we have not yet received a report on the cause of the collapse of 2/3 Durham Place. New owners keep buying in Chelsea in order to build structures better suited to other cities, or other places in London. Some in small houses with even smaller back yards want to extend into them. Sometimes the queues in shops would make you think that most inhabitants of Chelsea are builders.

The streets and pavements are busy as well. Many cyclists and electric scooter users continue to rank themselves higher than pedestrians, and some regard themselves above the law. By next March we hope that a Chelsea Society conference on traffic will help set some ground rules. We want equity between streets in taking the burdens of traffic, while recognising that some main roads are of London-wide importance.

Transport for London controls major highways and all London traffic lights, but there is still scope for planning within the Borough. This project will be led by

our Council members Chris Lenon, Mike Doyle and David Waddell. We will oppose any Transport for London plan which funnels traffic into unsuitable locations.

A personal plea to the Royal Borough is that they should not concentrate only on the means of propulsion of cars, but also pay attention to their size and weight. Whatever the means of propulsion, whether it be petrol, electricity, hydrogen or moonbeams, a large and heavy vehicle will always require more energy to move its mass, as well as occupying more space and adding more tyre and brake-pad pollution to the air we breathe.

I thank the Members of Council for their dedicated work in preserving and improving the amenities of Chelsea for the public benefit. They do this without pay, often spending much time on issues which would otherwise not come to public attention.

Our Constitution requires three members of Council to retire each year, though they may stand for re-election, and I am delighted that Michael Bach, Sarah Ingham and Jules Turner are willing to continue serving the Society.

Sir Paul Lever leads the Planning Committee as Chairman, and is also the member for Brompton-Hans Ward. Martyn Baker is the member for Chelsea Riverside Ward; Jules Turner for Royal Hospital Ward, and Michael Parkes, for Stanley Ward. David Waddell has a special interest in Chelsea riverside.

Our excellent and very active Planning Committee cannot deal with every individual planning application, but concentrates on major issues which affect us all. We have supported the efforts of other local amenity groups to stop inappropriate developments, and have met many of the developers of major sites at an early stage, making suggestions for improvement, which have sometimes been heeded.

The new Local Plan was not due till 2024 but has been brought forward because of implications for RBKC of a new London Plan, particularly the requirement to deliver over 400 new dwellings a year. Consultation has started and an "issues and options paper" has been circulated. It is heavily oriented towards development, and is light on heritage and conservation. We have commented accordingly.

We have pointed out that the national housing policy targets for RBKC are unachievable in our densely populated borough, and that there is no chance that these intended developments will bring down local prices, as they might

elsewhere in the country. In many cases they will not be occupied by local people, or even occupied at all. We hold the view that public housing should give priority to key workers, and we are still discussing whether any payments made by developers to the Council should provide housing only to those who have some real connection with Chelsea, or be spent outside Chelsea where they would provide more value for money.

South Kensington station

The RBKC Planning Committee has recently refused an application for the around-station redevelopment which the Society, and over a thousand others, opposed. The proposed buildings were too high, dense and dominant and would have been incompatible with the surrounding conservation area.

Marks and Spencer building on the Kings Road

An application for redevelopment has been submitted, but no date yet fixed for a Planning Committee meeting. The Society has objected on grounds of "canyonisation" in which serried ranks of large buildings dominate the streetscape, changing streets into ravines.

King's Parade, King's Road

The ugly 1970s building has been demolished and building work has started on the site. The Developers were receptive to suggestions from the Society.

Lot's Road

The Council has begun consultations on the future of land it owns on the west side of Lot's Road, including the car-pound and auction house. The Chelsea Society has emphasised that priority should be to enhance Chelsea's only employment zone, not on housing, and on provision of a social care home to replace Thamesbrook, which we have been promised since it was closed in July 2015. This has taken far too long.

Cheyne Embankment/Cadogan Pier

The Chelsea Society has urged RBKC to be more pro-active in resisting attempts to install large residential houseboats which damage the visual amenity of this Conservation Area. Our Vice-chairman has considered in detail the legal issues involved, and is working with the Cheyne Walk Trust on this.

The Vice-chairman has also persuaded RBKC, to serve a dilapidations notice on the owners of the Cabman's Shelter by Albert Bridge, and we are pleased that it is now being restored.

I have always wanted to give a Society Prize for new architecture in Chelsea. Perhaps you can help by suggesting good new buildings (preferably which are at least several years old, so that if they have already worn badly they can be excluded). Prizes will be given on the Ruskin principle, drawn from his Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849):

“When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for; and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say, as they look upon the labour and wrought substance of them, 'See! This our fathers did for us.'”

We have started our events again.

On October 13th we visited the Garrick Club and saw their marvellous art collection.

On October 27th Guy Fairbank took us on a carefully researched Chelsea Walk, and found new material to astound even life-long Chelsea residents.

On 10th November Sasha Swire was interviewed by Michael Stephen at Waterstones on her book “Diary of an MP's wife”, and 40 members attended.

On Remembrance Sunday November 14th, for the first time we joined the official ceremony to lay a wreath at the War Memorial in Sloane Square. Many members attended, and came to the Church service afterwards. We hope that many more of you will attend next year.

There are two more events still to come this year:

On Wednesday next we will have Christmas drinks at 6 pm followed by private showing of “The Sound of Music” in the very comfortable setting of the new Everyman Cinema on King's Road and Old Church Street corner. If you haven't booked yet, bring a cheque or credit card. You can also bring guests.

We want your suggestions for films you would like to see again, preferably with a chance to meet some of the actors or directors involved.

Also, by contacting Cadogan Hall, you can book a place on a private visit to Artisans du Chocolat in Lower Sloane Street on Wednesday 15 December.

I would like to thank Gaye Murdoch, who has spent many hours arranging our events and dealing with logistical difficulties arising from Covid restrictions.

We are in a good financial position, and over the past 5 years our total funds have slowly risen from £40,000 to £71,000. We have achieved this despite the pandemic, and the difficulty of getting retail advertising revenue. We are a registered charity, and have absolutely no objection to your remembering the Society in your Will.

We are just 21 people short of having 1000 members, and with your help we will reach a thousand very quickly. Invite friends to our events, and make sure that we have a chance to offer them membership. They can join through our website, whether they live in Chelsea or not. If you are a member of a Residents' Association or any other special interest group, let them know about the Chelsea Society. If a neighbour ever needs help about a planning matter, get them to join the Society.

Under the editorship of Dr Sarah Ingham, the Annual Report continues to flourish. Incidentally, the next issue happens to be about the topical issue of transport. I am also grateful to the Vice-chairman for producing regular e-mailings, and half-yearly Bulletins, 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.

In November 1999 the Chelsea Society approached Sir Eduardo Paolozzi who lived and worked in Dovehouse Street for 40 years and asked him produce a sculpture for public display. He agreed, generously waived his fee, and said he would like to celebrate Oscar Wilde in a bronze sculpture. Sadly, his ill-health prevented him going beyond a maquette of the intended work, but 22 years later, I am happy to report that due to the perseverance of one of our members, who was personal secretary to Sir Eduardo for 7 years, the Paolozzi Foundation have given permission for a posthumous casting of the statue, to be placed in Dovehouse Green. RBKC are supportive, and may assist with funding, as will other institutions, and we intend to assist by giving it publicity, and having a public meeting about the project. We may possibly have a

season of films based on Oscar Wilde plays. Contributions will be on a personal basis and we will provide special links for members to do this.

Now to matters of food and drink. Waitrose, who have kindly contributed to the refreshments tonight, tell me that they expect to be back in larger premises by September 2023. RBKC has not yet accepted the planning application to demolish the Marks and Spencer building on the Kings Road, so it is likely that M&S will be there for a little while longer.

The pandemic has taught us how much every community depends on the simple pleasures of human contact, of the joy of chance encounters. Our Society is here to gather us together to strengthen the spirit of 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 2021, in this the 94th year since the foundation of our Society.