



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT
TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
OF THE CHELSEA SOCIETY
HELD ON 14th NOVEMBER 2022

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

We came out from the long aftermath of Covid into the brutal reality of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and once again Europe found itself at war. In truth, though this was a shock to us, it was the 8th year of warfare for the Ukrainians. They have suffered terrible human losses, and have seen the fabric of their cities destroyed, taking with them the artefacts which embody their nation. When the war finally ends the Society should give what help it can for the rebuilding of the cultural heritage of Ukraine.

We may have to wait a long time for that day, but it calls to mind the last verse of Marina Tsvetayeva's 1915 poem "*I know the truth – give up all other truths*"

The wind is level now, the earth is wet with dew,

The storm of stars in the sky will turn to quiet.

And soon all of us will sleep under the earth,

Who never let each other sleep above it.

Last April, more than 100 members of the Society heard a lecture by General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, former Deputy Supreme Commander of NATO, on the war in Ukraine, and General Sir Nick Carter has agreed to address us on Defence Strategy in the light of Ukraine on Monday 20th February. We will also hear on 16th January from the renowned author Mark Galeotti, who has made an in-depth study of Vladimir Putin.

I thank my Council members for their dedicated work during the year in preserving and improving the amenities of Chelsea for the public benefit.

Our Constitution requires three members of Council to retire each year. I am delighted that Fleur de Villiers and Amalia Cebreiro are willing to continue serving the Society and have been re-elected.

Martyn Baker retired from the Council and is not seeking re-election. He has served since 2007, making a great contribution with his very thorough reports and proposals, and though leaving

the Council he will remain a member of the Planning Committee for a further year. Martyn recalls many exceptional individuals who made great contributions during his 15 years as a Council member, and urges creative and energetic members to volunteer their services now.

On that note, it is very good to be able to welcome Ian Henderson as a recently co-opted member of Council who has been elected today. He served as an RBKC Councillor and ran a successful campaign, which we supported, to preserve the Sutton Estate buildings..

Sir Paul Lever leads the Planning Committee as Chairman, and is also the member for Brompton-Hans Ward. Martyn Baker will for the next year deal with Chelsea Riverside Ward; Jules Turner for Royal Hospital Ward, and Michael Parkes, for Stanley Ward. Also, David Waddell, who has a special interest in the Chelsea riverside. The Committee studies long and complex planning reports and makes sure that our views are heard by the planning authority.

They have been kept busy this year, but with the welcome change that more developers are approaching us before submitting applications. They have come to appreciate that if they do not pay attention to the quiet and helpful suggestions of Sir Paul Lever and his Committee , they could find themselves consulting us again when their first proposal gets rejected.

We do not encourage development, as Chelsea can sometimes feel like a building-site, and if the structure of a building can be preserved and redesigned to be more presentable without demolition, that saves carbon and reduces the tonnage of spoil to be removed by lorries on our streets.

If a new building is required, we want something which reflects the spirit of Chelsea: artistic, quirky, using quality materials, and able to put a smile on the face of passers-by. We also want some community benefit from every building, and I believe we are slowly achieving it.

We have an active events programme for our members, and I would like to thank Gaye Murdoch, who has spent many hours tracking down opportunities for our events, dealing with the requirements of our host venues, and keeping in touch with our members.

In February we had a meeting at Waterstones with Andrew Lownie to discuss his book on the Duke of Windsor, and another in May with Andrew Roberts to discuss his book on King George III. In March we had a talk about the Blitz in Chelsea. It is worth remembering that although we are rightly alarmed by Putin's nuclear sabre rattling, our immediate ancestors had to put up with actual death and destruction here in Chelsea.

More cheerfully, in April we had a guided walk around Chelsea, hearing stories about local pop stars and celebrities. We had a private view of the Queen's Gallery in May, and we toured the jewel that is the Reform Club in June. In October we had another tour of Chelsea with Guy Fairbank and learned how the spy Kim Philby could afford to live in Carlyle Square. We already have five events confirmed for next year of which you will find details on our website.

Anyone who joins us will find much to inform and entertain them, and at every event our members have contributed personal knowledge not known even to the professional guides.

One of our members, the Chelsea character John Rendall, who raised a lion cub in Chelsea, died in January, and in May a concert was held in his honour. The Chelsea Flower Show came back to the Royal Hospital, and on our streets Chelsea in Bloom was a marvel. One excellent floral display after another, with no queues, and no need for entrance tickets.

But very sadly in May there was another fatal accident on Chelsea's roads, this time on the Embankment at the junction with Oakley Street. Our planned meeting with Transport for London to try to make these junctions safer was delayed by a dispute about funding, and we hope to have the meeting early next year. We are in favour of equity between streets, so that all share traffic loads as fairly as possible, while recognising that main streets have always been busier than the side-streets.

In a return to post-Covid normality, in June we celebrated the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, a time of happiness and calm, with many local street parties all over Chelsea, the village at its best, chattering over a drink, visiting neighbours and enjoying the spirit of community, while the flypast of the Royal Air Force thundered directly over us.

Sadly only three months later we lost our Queen, who, as Princess Elizabeth, was only one year old when the Chelsea Society was founded in 1927. Her death affected us deeply. During all those years she had lived in our minds and our hearts, and for 70 of them as our Sovereign Lady. The procession past her coffin in Westminster Hall was for some of us a recognition that we were mourning a Britain which seems gone forever. But life must go on, and we wish our new King every health and happiness as he begins his reign.

In Chelsea we had to explain to Transport for London why we wanted to keep our buses, on which so many residents rely, and there was huge local resistance to the cuts which they had proposed. We await the outcome of the consultation.

We still do not know why the 1790 house on Durham Place collapsed, and there is still a cruel gap in this beautiful Georgian terrace. Continuing legal disputes have apparently impeded a public statement on the causes of its falling down.

We are in favour of Sloane Square being put to use by outdoor restaurants, but what is eaten and drunk will be digested. We have managed to get the automatic wc near the station put back into working order, and we are opposed to it being removed.

We still have no replacement for the Thamesbrook Care Home on Dovehouse Street. A new building at Lot's Road may eventually provide a remedy, but it is very slow in coming.

St Wilfrid's Convent and Care home closed some years ago, and a sale may be about to be completed. The Society has made strong representations to RBKC about the size and appearance of any replacement, and about the need for community provision on that site.

We have fought to preserve the cabman's shelter by Albert Bridge, and are pleased that it has now been fully restored, and listed in Grade II, together with the cabman's shelter in Pont Street. All three shelters in Chelsea are now listed.

We have also campaigned to preserve the four tollbooths on Albert Bridge which are deteriorating, and are pleased that work to repaint them will be starting soon. We are grateful to Councillor Kemahli and the Riverside Councillors for responding to our request.

We are very concerned that the traditional houseboats on Chelsea Reach are threatened by replacement by large two storey floating structures which look like pre-fabs. The Society has therefore contributed financially to joint action with the Cheyne Walk Trust and others to get a King's Counsel's opinion on planning law, on a brief written by our Vice Chairman. This opinion concludes that, RBKC is perfectly entitled to control the size and appearance of boats, and we are discussing this further with RBKC.

As a delayed effect of Covid lockdowns, we saw businesses close, with staff becoming scarce and consumers struggling with rising prices: an uncertain recovery. In response to this the King's Road Partnership is working to bring together retailers to restore our status as a popular destination, and all Chelsea Society members can apply for a card to take advantage of the discounts offered by participating businesses - useful before Christmas. They also plan to coordinate the many delivery lorries, so as to reduce the traffic. We will get them to tell us more about it at a meeting next year.

Yesterday, Remembrance Sunday, the Society laid a wreath at the War Memorial in Sloane Square, and many of us attended the service at Holy Trinity church afterwards.

As you have already heard, we are in a good financial position, and over the past 6 years our total funds have risen from £40,000 to £84,942, so we are able to contribute to important causes such as the houseboats which I have already mentioned, and to give prizes for local competitions such as the photography competition. We have achieved this despite the pandemic, and the difficulty of getting advertising revenue for our Annual Report. As a registered charity, we would like you to remember the Society in your wills.

We now have 1041 members - 62 more than this time last year. Please invite friends to our events, and encourage them to join us. If your neighbours need help about a planning matter, get them to join the Society.

We have looked at the sharp rises in our operating costs, including postage, printing, hiring of venues and general expenses, but have decided not to raise our subscriptions. We don't want to complain about prices, and then raise them.

The Annual Report under the editorship of Dr Sarah Ingham, continues to flourish, and the latest one was an absolute triumph. "Far better than Country Life," was one reaction, and we have printed extra copies to tempt potential advertisers for this year's Annual Report.

I am also grateful to the Vice-Chairman, Michael Stephen, for producing regular e-mailings, and half-yearly Bulletins, and for managing the website and our presence on Instagram, where we now have more than a thousand Followers. You can find on the website all our Annual Reports (which are now indexed) and also the Bulletins. The website has been viewed in the last month by more than 3,000 visitors from all over the world.

Volunteers are always welcome to help the Society in any of our activities, including helping with the refreshments at events like this AGM. You can give as much or as little time as you like.

Last year I mentioned the plan to put a statue of Oscar Wilde by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi on Dovehouse Green, and since then, behind the scenes the indefatigable force behind the project, our member Vicky Jacobsen, has brought together all the parties so that the project can come to fruition. RBKC are giving strong support and covering 75% of the costs, and our

Society, who commissioned the statue in 1999, will be helping with the task of raising the remaining funds.

There are many Chelsea characters (living and dead) whom we should celebrate. One of our members was selling a house for a client on Cheyne Walk. Just before completion the prospective buyer was told that the house was haunted, whereupon she phoned to say the deal was off.

He pleaded for time to make some phone calls, and she grudgingly accepted. He rang his contact and said: "Did one of your band members ever buy a house on Cheyne Walk?" "Yes, Keith Richard" replied the contact, and was about to put the phone down, but our member pleaded: "Did he say the house was haunted?" After a long pause came the reply: "Every house Keith Richard lived in was haunted". The deal went through.

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.

Mr. President, it now gives me great pleasure to present this account of our activities in this the 95th year of our Society.