

## Stratford-upon-Avon Society - AGM Monday 9 March 2009

### Report of the Chairman

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen

Who would have thought at our last AGM that by the time this next AGM came round we would be in recession as severe as this? Worse still are the prospects that the problems are likely to be longer rather than short-term. But life must go on and, despite the difficulties, some continue and much can still be done. For example, the building of the new theatre progresses, and however important this was when construction started, its importance and significance to the local and regional economy, its significance is now much greater with the impact of the recession. In the best interest of the town's economy it has to succeed.

There are also tasks which can be undertaken in these difficult times. Some of these were set out recently in the excellent response of Brian Wright and the Strategy Group to the draft Core Strategy which received good coverage in the local press a few days ago. The suggestions were made that we should address problems in the town centre now – parking, traffic and support for the retail sector. These issues need to be addressed now so that we are ready to move forward when the economy recovers...as it will. Another project which can be helpful in such times is the Society's plan for the Historic Spine, but I shall return to that later.

**Talks:** Looking back on the activities of the Society in the past year, we have had an excellent winter season with our Programme of Speakers. Attendances have been very good indeed (although our Programme Secretary would on occasions have liked more there) and the facilities provided by the Falcon have been first class. The opening Talk by Dr Diana Owen, the new Director of the Birthplace, attracted well over 100 people in September. And another notable local, Vikki Heywood of the RSC had an excellent audience as well.

We are always looking for ideas to improve the arrangements for this Programme and welcome suggestions. The committee has looked at this and next year we shall be raising a small admission charge for any visitors who come to these Talks – this will cover some of our expenses and preserve some benefit for our own members.

As a result of Diana Owen's successful Talk we have agreed to arrange a visit of Society members to the Birthplace in the summer. The date is Tuesday 7 July starting at 6.30 pm and booking details will be available within the next

few weeks. Things are happening at the Birthplace and members will have the opportunity to view the Trust's two new exhibitions – the permanent Life, Love and Legacy at the visitor centre which uses theatrical and audio-visual techniques to present the great man's life and worldwide influence, and a Life Portrait exhibition which examines the case for a new portrait of Shakespeare and his relationship with the Earl of Southampton. This portrait was the topic of a news release today which has appeared on national news.

**This is an important date for your diaries (7 July) and we shall be limited to 60 people**

**Social events:** Last year we had a couple of very successful social events. In July we visited Holy Trinity Church where we were taken round by the Rev. Martin Gorrick. There was a full house of 60 members and guests for this visit.

In December we visited the Lord Leycester Hospital in Warwick, and were thoroughly entertained and informed by the Master of the Hospital.

(We had no Christmas event last year but we are looking into some event for the coming Christmas).

**Website:** Our website continues to go from strength to strength, and increasingly provides members with an update of Society events, details of our response to planning applications and details of our publications. Thanks to the efforts of our web master, Ian Fradgley, the Society now has a toehold in the 21st century.

Ian Fradgley and the website are now supported by a Communications Group under the chairmanship of Ian Heggie, and the Group also co-ordinates the preparation of The Talk of the Town, now twice yearly, and the still comparatively new Update, which appears every two months, and has been very well received. Our communications capability has been strengthened by the arrival of Richard Kemp, who works with the Birthplace. Richard has offered his PR expertise for one year, and he was involved in the recent press release of the Strategy Group, to which I have already referred.

I reported last year that the sales of Robert Bearman's book 'Stratford-upon-Avon. A History of its Streets and building' were going well and I am delighted to report that all copies have now been sold – we had 500 printed. We were particularly indebted to the Town Trust for the grant of £1,000, because this enabled us to sell the book at a reasonable price (£5 for members) and ensure that all books were sold.

Last year I also reported that we had received a grant of £500 from WestMASA for our schools project, run by Beryl Downing, on a Carbon Footprint book comparing life in Stratford when the Mop first started with the way we live today. This project has been started with the co-operation of two schools, Bridgetown Primary and Stratford High, and once these schools have reviewed progress we hope to offer the idea for other schools. Copies of the book are available here this evening for any member who may be interested.

**WCS:** The WCS Initiative seems to meander along at its own pace. The Pedestrian Footbridge, to the surprise of no-one, was dropped last year by WCC. Curiously, however, in the last days of the project, there was a hint that one of the reasons for its rejection was a lack of funding for ancillary works.

The work on the Bancroft Gardens continues ... and continues. Last year we were saying that despite our strong concerns we should now wait to see the results of the project when completed. Well, we are still waiting, and we know there have been major problems both on and off the site. But the latest word is that the Gardens should now be finished this coming April.

**The Walkable Core:** As part of Phase Two of the WCS, the WCC has appointed Arup to develop the Walkable Core which is a concept in the Urban Design Framework. The objectives of the Walkable Core are to create a pedestrian friendly environment in the historic centre of the town and to give a higher priority to the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and public transport.

The Society's own proposals for the Historic Spine have been accepted as a key element of the Walkable Core and many of you will have seen the excellent DVD prepared by Ian Heggie. We have a strong team led by Peter Burgess developing these ideas with Arup and progress to date is very good. We have consulted many groups locally and have widespread support for the proposals, and this includes strong endorsements from both Diana Owen and Vikki Heywood.

Generally, our thoughts for the Historic Spine envisage removal of unnecessary signage, creation of wider pavements, improved quality of paving, restrictions on loading and unloading, some reduction of parking in the streets along the core so that we can better enjoy the buildings.

WCC and Arup are now working up four options of possibilities in the Town Centre. We are heavily involved in these consultations and our aim is to ensure that our plans for the Historic Spine form part of the Walkable Core

when the detail is finally settled. This, I am sure, will be a key project for us in the coming year, because this is a project we should be able to deliver, given, given the current financial difficulties.

We had a shock earlier this year when Leon Tanner reported to the committee that SDC had discontinued our monthly meetings with the Planners, as part of our consultation process on planning applications. We sought an urgent meeting with the Planning Authority and met the Strategic Director and the Senior Planners just less than two weeks ago. We outlined the significant role played by the Society, as a Civic Trust, in commenting upon planning applications and reminded them we had been around for over 40 years. We attached great value to the monthly meetings because they saved a great deal of letters, emails and telephone calls. The SDC as a planning service has not been meeting some Government Targets and they are introducing ways of sharpening up the process. In future all applications will be on the website and they are also looking to ensure that all comments on the applications are received within the 21 day period.

On more than one occasion we found ourselves saying that if only the authority had let us know of their problems we could have helped them come to solutions as we are all interested in securing a more efficient and effective planning service.

As a result, the Planners are now aware of our strong views on the value of monthly meetings: we are aware of the changes they need to make. We have agreed that we shall each consider ways of sharpening up the system and Leon and representatives from our Planning Group will meet the SDC Planners very shortly in order to discuss and agree a way through these issues which is acceptable to both sides.

**Retirements:** It is appropriate here to record that four of our key officers have given notice of their intention to retire.

After many years service, **Neville Usher** stood down as Social Secretary and his work there and with the oral history will be sorely missed.

**Jack Crimp** our Photographer for many years is standing down at this AGM so his photographs this evening will be his last for us – many thanks Jack.

**Joan Burgess** our Programme Secretary is standing down after the April Talk, and our thanks to Joan for the quality and success of the programmes which she has planned and organised – a first class effort.

Finally, our Secretary, **Beryl Downing** is standing down after three years so that she can concentrate on other activities for the Society. No-one

appreciates a good secretary more than a chairman and I know we shall miss her industry, her reliability and her efficiency and she will be hard to replace. I am delighted to report that Beryl will continue to prepare Update and the Schools Project on the Mop.

The loss of all these years experience is undoubtedly a blow to the Society, but I know you would wish us to place on record our thanks and appreciation for their efforts.

**Recruiting officers:** Looking to the future we now have to replace these important posts. We have secured a photographer, Dick Prior, to replace Jack Crimp, but we still have to fill the posts of **Secretary, Programme Secretary and Social Secretary**. Volunteers have not yet come forward but perhaps they will tonight. Beryl has promised to assist in the change-over, and Joan has already settled the Programme of Speakers for next year. I look to members of the Society to come forward to help, because the last thing we want to do is to reduce the level of services or drop any of these activities. **It is your Society and it is up to you.**

**Mayors of Stratford** Can I conclude on a very happy note and record that we are all delighted that one of our members is to be the next Mayor of Stratford, and we send our best wishes and congratulations to Jenny Fradgley, and of course to her consort Ian. This is setting quite a trend for the Society because in the first year of my chairmanship another of our members was Mayor – Roy Lodge. What it is to have friends in high places!!

Finally can I express my thanks to our President, Officers, members of the General Committee for all their support and help throughout the year and also to Society members and many people outside the Society who have helped us on countless occasions. Thank you all.

Ian Prosser

Chairman