



CHAIR'S REPORT FOR 2017-18

Introduction

This is my last report for Friends of The Wilson as I am stepping down after serving five years as a trustee, four of them as Chair.

These have been changing times for The Wilson. I joined the committee in 2013, the year in which the gallery and museum re-opened following a major redevelopment, and I became Chair the following year, when it became one of the locations managed by the Cheltenham Trust.

This period has been a difficult one for museums and galleries generally. A report by Sir David Cannadine published by the Art Fund in February this year pointed out that “the museums of the United Kingdom have experienced a decade of diminishing funding”¹ which shows no sign of coming to an end. In real terms, public spending on museums and galleries in England fell by 13 per cent in the period between 2007 and 2017, and local authorities in England cut spending on museums and galleries by 31% between 2010 and 2016.

The Wilson costs £500,000 a year (net) to operate, and is heavily subsidised by the Cheltenham Trust's other activities. Appended to this report is a report by Julie Finch, Chief Executive of the Cheltenham Trust, which sets out the current situation at The Wilson and the Trust's plans for its future.

Membership

Our membership levels have dropped slightly and a drive to recruit new members will be an important task for the trustees over the next year or two. Nevertheless we remain one of Cheltenham's largest voluntary organisations, with over 600 members. I would like to thank our Membership Secretary, Mike Jenkinson, for managing the membership database and for collecting the subscriptions which account for the majority of our income. Online payment and renewal of subscriptions has been successfully introduced during the year, which is resulting in a more streamlined process. Together with our Secretary, John Beard, Mike has also had to grapple with the complexities of the new General Data Protection Regulation and they both deserve special thanks for this.

Trustees

Our trustees have a wide range of skills and interests and I would like to thank them for giving so generously of their time and expertise. As Chair I have been very ably supported by my deputy, Adrian Barlow, by the Secretary, John Beard, and by the Treasurer, Mark

¹ *Why Collect? A report on museum collecting today*, David Cannadine, the Art Fund, 2018, page 7

Holliday. Sue Pearce and Amanda Slayton-Joslin have taken over the running of our events with flair and energy while Brian Shawcross has brought to the committee his passionate support for The Wilson's collections and for the volunteer programme.

Communication with our members

In addition to our electronic communications we continue to produce a high quality printed newsletter three times a year, which is sent by post. This is an increasingly expensive means of communication, although the costs are partially offset by advertising revenue. I would like to thank our Newsletter Editor, Martin Renshaw, and our Mailing Organiser, Sue Reeves, for all the hard work that they contribute to keeping members informed. I would also like to thank the University of Gloucestershire who now provide a franking and postage service for our newsletter mailings.

Events

After subscriptions, events are our largest source of income. The events programme regularly produces over £5,000 per year for our funds. For the last year the programme has been run by our very efficient events team of Sue Pearce, Amanda Slayton-Joslin, Anne Bartlett, Martha Alleguen and Alison Pascoe. The addition of three non-trustee volunteers to the team to organise trips and manage bookings has been a resounding success. Online booking and payment for events has been introduced by the bookings co-ordinators with help from our Treasurer, Mark Holliday, and our volunteer webmaster, David Hewitt, with the result that 60% of bookings are now being made through the website.

Support for The Wilson during 2017-18

During 2017-18 we pledged £6,000 towards the new World of Wonders gallery and £3,000 towards improved internal and external signage at The Wilson.

We also committed £35,000 to fund a Feasibility Study for Phase 2 of The Wilson's redevelopment. The emphasis of Phase 2 will be on engaging (and re-engaging) both residents and visitors with The Wilson's permanent collections. The proposal includes opening up the current "dark spaces" in the museum galleries, providing fresh interpretation of the collections, and developing new audiences for them. The Feasibility Study - in which the Friends will be closely involved - is an essential precursor to a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund and other potential funders.

Our support this year was boosted by a generous donation of £4,000 from our President, PJ Crook, as we were one of the charities to benefit from her Christmas Open Studio event.

Future support for The Wilson

As Sir David Cannadine points out in his report for the Art Fund, "neither the Heritage Lottery Fund, private foundations or wealthy individuals are interested in funding recurrent expenditure or giving money to help balance operating budgets that are running a deficit".² Friends groups have generally avoided this type of funding as well. There was therefore extensive discussion (and some dissent) among the trustees when we were recently approached by the Cheltenham Trust with a request to fund a half-time curator post for a year. In the end we agreed on a majority vote to go ahead but with strict conditions attached, including an assurance that the post could be sustainably funded in the future.

² Cannadine, page 21

We are conscious that, in the words of the Art Fund report, “the morale, the confidence and the numbers of curatorial staff, who are essential to the management, display and development of our nation’s public art collections ... have been in serious decline for some time”³ and we are anxious to prevent the loss of knowledge and skills relating to The Wilson’s key collections.

The request is, however, indicative of the changing nature of our relationship with The Wilson. We cannot simply be fair weather friends. In difficult times, when public funding is decreasing and some museums are being forced to close, we need to up our game rather than just stand by. I would therefore like to close by urging all our members to consider how you can become active fundraisers rather than passive subscribers, in order to maximise the support we provide to The Wilson. Can you be an ambassador, encouraging others to join? Can you make a donation over and above your subscription? Can you sponsor an edition of the newsletter? Can you leave us a legacy? When we conducted a member survey two years ago, the reason most respondents gave for joining the Friends was “to support The Wilson”. The Wilson now needs that support more than ever.

Hilary Simpson
Chair, Friends of The Wilson
May 2018

APPENDIX

REPORT BY JULIE FINCH, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE CHELTENHAM TRUST

The Cheltenham Trust has worked hard to deliver a wide range of opportunities for enriching the lives of local people and those from outside the area. Now 3.5 years old, the Trust is working to sustain its future and to establish a strong programme and fantastic visitor experience. The Trust operates The Wilson and four other venues (the Town Hall, Pittville Pump Room, the Prince of Wales Stadium and Leisure @). The turnover of the Trust is £5.5m, with £780,000 funding support from Cheltenham Borough Council per annum against a Service Level Agreement. The Trust operates in a difficult economic climate. The public purse is stretched, competition for reduced public funding is greater than ever and the fundraising climate is challenging.

The Trust has to raise the remainder of its income through commercial activity. The Service Level Agreement relates to operations; specific learning, health and wellbeing and community activity; and the provision of sport and culture. We provide excellent value for money for the local authority. Our overall footfall to Trust venues was 990,000 in 2017/18, which included over 8,000 learning opportunities on site and a further 30,000 learning opportunities off site. The Wilson costs £500,000 pa (net) to operate, and is subsidised by sports activity, productions at the Town Hall and the hire of venue spaces across the Trust.

The Trust has sourced income from a number of organisations: £270,000 through Arts Council England’s Museum Resilience Fund for wayfinding, websites, fundraising, programme and working with artists, and £130,000 through the DCMS/Wolfson Museums & Galleries Improvement Fund for the development of the World of Wonders Gallery (WOW), a redisplay of the world cultures collection. Further funding has been sourced from the Friends of The Wilson, for which we are very grateful. This includes £35,000 towards the

³ Cannadine, page 8

Feasibility Study for Stage 2 redevelopment, £6,000 towards the World of Wonders Gallery and £3,000 towards external signage.

We are working in an increasingly competitive market and competing for income from the public. This is a challenging time in which to operate; other museums are closing and the provision of public services is declining. However, we are striving to develop The Wilson's offer and our footfall has grown from 84,981 in 2016/17 to 101,633 in 2017/18. We are working hard at increasing footfall and developing strong relationships with our audiences to work towards developing The Wilson as the best regional museum in the country.

As the Trust moves forward, we are reshaping our organisation to create a higher degree of focus on the resilience in our business units, redevelopment of venues and investment in maintenance programmes, working alongside our partner, Cheltenham Borough Council. We are also working on building our relationship with the public at large and our key stakeholders, forming a greater bond and support for what the Trust can provide through learning, skills and talent, community engagement and health and wellbeing.

For The Wilson the importance of the Phase 2 development cannot be stressed enough. We need to build a relationship between collections and audiences by using our space here at the venue more effectively (including the closed spaces), make sense of the building and the architecture, create links to the Library next door and share the stories of our collections with the world. This is an exciting opportunity and we need to work towards an agreed approach and fundraising strategy to deliver the project. We know that there is interest from Arts Council England whose Chair, Sir Nicolas Serota, visited two weeks ago. The Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Stephen Boyce, has also spent time at The Wilson in recent weeks.

The Feasibility Study will capture the master plan for the future of The Wilson, create a more sustainable business model, encourage community use and engagement, champion the collections, develop a new programme and devise inventive ways of partnership working, working with artists and specialists, and involving the public. We do not envisage new build, but we do see a reordering of spaces, larger galleries being opened up and more collections on display. At the same time we will be working with Gloucester City Museums on collections storage opportunities and collections development, shaping our working relationship across Gloucestershire with other partners, and seeking funding from a number of sources. As a transition phase, The Wilson will remain vibrant, and we will work in new ways to take the venue forward. The support of the Friends is key to the future of The Wilson as we launch a public campaign and work with key funders to enable the development of the whole building.

Julie Finch
Chief Executive, the Cheltenham Trust
May 2018