

Chair's Report 2020-2021

I want to begin by thanking you all for your continuing support of The Friends in the twelve months since I gave my last Chair's Report – then, as now, using Zoom because we cannot yet meet face-to-face. A year ago, we were coming towards the end of the first Lockdown and there were hopes that, with the furlough scheme expected to end in August, we should be able to see The Wilson reopen in the Autumn or by Christmas at the latest. Ironically, it was not long after that before the Government announced the extension of the furlough scheme – a life-saver for most, but sadly not quite all, of the Cheltenham Trust's staff.

The Trust itself was able to announce its plans for creating a new Community Arts Gallery and for reconfiguring the existing café and the ground-floor foyer, reception and retail areas. The cost of this was to be met by a generous and unexpected bequest from the Charles Irving Trust. These plans were announced on The Wilson's website and on the front and rear entrances to the Art Gallery and Museum under the banner headline, 'Something New and Exciting is Happening'. That brave headline reflects, as I look at it now, the growing optimism felt a year ago that the Lockdown was working, that the pandemic would soon be under control and that a return to normal – or at least to the 'new normal' – would soon be possible.

I well remember the sense of frustration many people expressed last summer (and all of us still feel a year later) about the ongoing closure of The Wilson. I am struck by the force of a statement by the Director of the National Gallery in Washington DC, published in *Apollo* magazine in April this year:

Museums do not simply preserve and protect masterpieces in empty rooms. We open our door, literally and figuratively, because we believe creating opportunities to experience the works of art and gain a deeper understanding of them, and of our shared humanity, will make a difference to other people.

Museums then, self-evidently, need to be open. But keeping them open costs money, a lot of it and a continuing flow of it. It's not for me to explain the Cheltenham Trust's financial position and projections to you tonight, but I will make two points on their behalf. First, the Pandemic, and the cycle of Lockdowns that began in March last year, had a devastating and immediate impact on the Trust's ability to stay afloat. Overnight the revenue generated by the Town Hall, the Leisure Centre and the Prince of Wales Stadium, the Pittville Pump Room and The Wilson dried up. Only the huge and wholly unexpected success of the

café enterprises at the Pump Room and in Imperial Square, together with the Trust's expertise in accessing some significant grants from the various Covid-Recovery Emergency Funds, have kept it solvent.

The priority for the Trust this year is a simple, but crucial, one: recovery – getting its finances back to a position where it can realistically plan ahead for the future. And that future is, as I understand it, one in which the annual financial support provided by Cheltenham Borough Council will decrease year on year. In other words, the Trust has to be increasingly self-sustaining.

My second point follows on from this. Our role as Friends of the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum is to support The Wilson. That's our single priority. The Trust's priorities are more wide-ranging and cannot always coincide with ours. Their mission statement (as published on their website) speaks of *Creating a Cheltenham that enriches the lives of its residents and visitors through a vibrant cultural economy and a distinctive sense of place*. In all our discussions with the Trust – and their representatives are always invited to our trustees' meetings – we try as far as possible to align our priorities with theirs and to help them to align theirs with ours, but I cannot pretend that there are not sometimes tensions.

When you reflect that in the past ten years the Friends have actually supported The Wilson financially to the tune of £435,000 and in all sorts of other, non-financial, ways, I think you will agree that our stake in Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum has been remarkable. As Chair, I have been immensely grateful to my fellow trustees for their patience and support as I have tried hard in the past three years to work towards a real partnership between the Friends and the Cheltenham Trust. I believe that is the right direction for us both to move. I shall say more in the last part of this report about the Trust's plans for the reopening of The Wilson and about the contribution I hope we, as the Friends, can make towards re-establishing its presence in the town and beyond.

First, though, I need to report on the activities that we have been able to conduct in the past twelve months and as ever my thanks, the thanks of all of us, go to the Events Group who put together and very effectively administer all our talks, outings and special events. In a year which has involved postponements, cancellations, refunds and rescheduling, Sue Pearce's team – Sue Reeves, Martha Alleguen and Alison Pascoe – have (metaphorically if not literally) kept the show on the road.

Our Zoom lectures got off to a shaky start when I gave a lecture on 'Portraits from The Wilson's Collections' to an audience of 17, but by the new year

numbers had greatly improved. I was particularly pleased that we had three talks on unusual aspects of the Arts & Crafts movement: Kirsty Hartsiotis talking about war memorials in the Cotswolds, Mary Greensted introducing us to the metal worker Arthur Cameron and Martin Graebe on the strong links between the Arts & Crafts in the Cotswolds and the revival of English folk song and dance. We also enjoyed a virtual tour of the streets of Bath with Maeve Hamilton Hercod and a virtuoso lecture by Nick Nelson on the topical subject of Art and Freedom.

As I speak we are very much looking forward to our first outing for 18 months: to Highnam, a visit that has already been postponed twice but which is now scheduled for 22 July and will have been very well worth the wait. My thanks to all our speakers and to all of you who signed on to enjoy them by Zoom. Speaking for myself, Zoom has been a boon, but I long for live speakers and live audiences again.

Perhaps the most dramatic event of the year was the least expected. At our trustees' meeting in March 2020 we were told The Wilson had been informed that an important picture by Angelika Kauffmann, a portrait of John Rushout, 2nd Baron Northwick, with strong historical and artistic links to Cheltenham, was about to come on the market. At that stage we were given to understand that the vendor wanted to know whether The Wilson would like to buy it. A rough figure of £70,000 was mooted, and we were asked whether the friends might in principle be interested in contributing to an appeal to raise the necessary funds. We responded with a cautious expression of interest, but with the first Lockdown following almost at once there was neither appetite nor opportunity to take the matter further on our side or on the Trust's.

Then in early October, I was contacted out of the blue by Charles Sebag-Montefiore, a former trustee of the National Gallery, with a proposition: the vendor of the painting, a private collector, was keen to see the Kauffmann portrait come to Cheltenham and was willing to sell it to The Wilson for a reduced price of £50,000, on one condition – that the deal had to be confirmed, and the money guaranteed, by the end of that month. This seemed to me a very tall order, and one that would be impossible to meet for two reasons: first, the Cheltenham Trust was at that time running on a minute skeleton staff with no resources – financial or human – to deal with such a challenge and, second, the Cheltenham Borough Council had just endorsed a decision by the Trust to impose a total moratorium on all acquisitions until after the art gallery and museum should be up and running again.

I was reassured, however, to learn that Charles Sebag-Montefiore was a trustee of an art charity, *The Society of Dilettanti*, which makes grants specifically to enable museums to purchase works of art and important historical archives. The Society was originally founded in 1734 and John Rushout, the sitter in Angelika Kauffmann's portrait, was once a member. Charles Sebag-Montefiore told me that this charity could commit a maximum of £16,000 towards the purchase price and asked if we, the Friends, could afford to commit £10,000 from our funds. In doing so the Friends and the Society of Dilettanti would then be putting up more than half of the asking price, and this would make it possible for an approach to be made to the Art Fund for an emergency grant of £24,000.

I shall always be grateful to my fellow trustees for saying quickly that we should make such a commitment, subject of course to various conditions. I was not so naïve as to imagine that there would be no additional costs involved, and I am very grateful to two Friends whose generosity enabled us to set up a contingency fund to cover whatever additional fees and costs might arise. I am also grateful to Laurie Bell, who (no doubt with some misgivings) agreed to let the Friends to act as negotiators on behalf of the Trust and the Borough Council, who would become the legal owners of the portrait. Her agreement was conditional upon the purchase of the portrait costing the Trust and the Borough Council not one penny. The negotiations would all be between the Friends and Martin Beisly Fine Art, of Pall Mall, acting as agents for the vendor.

With good will on all sides, and especially on Martin's Beisly's and the vendor's, we managed to get an agreement in principle from the Art Fund to make the grant of £24,000. Here I have to say that the real heroine of this whole story was Kirsty Hartsiotis. With the Trust's approval, we commissioned Kirsty to complete the very detailed and complex application form for the grant. This she did within an absurdly short space of time. It is a tribute to her enthusiasm for the portrait and to her professionalism as a curator that she produced in little more than two days a superb application which normally could have taken the best part of a month to prepare. The agreements were all in place by 31st October and although there followed a number of small administrative hiccups, the final payment was made to the vendor in January.

All of us as Friends can feel a certain justified pride in having been able to secure for The Wilson, and for Cheltenham, this 1794 portrait by one of the leading female artists in the history of European art. You will have read articles about the picture and about its significance for Cheltenham in the Spring and Summer issues of our *Newsletter*. Nothing in 2022 will give me greater pleasure than to

see this fine work of art properly displayed in our newly re-opened art gallery and museum.

So I turn now from the events of the past year to the year ahead.

As you will know, the Cheltenham Trust has announced that it plans to re-open The Wilson by April 2022. When it does, it will introduce the Charles Irving Community Art Gallery on the mezzanine level, and a radically reconfigured ground floor featuring a new and lively community Arts Café that will make best use of all the ancillary ground floor spaces for retail, events and activities, both inside and outside at the rear of the venue. In addition, new artist studios will be provided on the third floor (in the former office space). The entrance and welcome area, including the large desk area, will be transformed, for the Trust is no longer the provider of tourist information.

These are exciting prospects, and as Friends of The Wilson I hope we can all support the Cheltenham Trust in its vision and plan to ensure that the Art Gallery and Museum is financially sustainable in the future. There is not an art gallery and museum in the country which is not having to do the same thing. It is vital that we support the Trust in attracting and retaining new visitors, as well as old friends. I say 'we' because I see this as a job for us, the Friends, as well as for the Cheltenham Trust. But, speaking specifically for the Friends, I must say that one of *our* most critical tasks, as the re-opening at last becomes reality, must be to launch a new recruitment drive to boost and to broaden our membership, which in turn means increasing our ability to support The Wilson to achieve greater footfall and financial stability.

We are a charity; specifically, we are an educational charity because The Wilson – like any public museum or art gallery – has itself an educational purpose. It is a destination which people choose to visit, which we should *want* them to visit, and to keep coming back, to have their horizons expanded and to be part of a great experience. You'll remember that the Friends' Constitution has one clear stated aim: 'The education of the public through the support of the Art Gallery and Museum'. The role of the Friends' trustees is to ensure that the money with which the charity is entrusted is well spent in fulfilment of that aim. People come to galleries to engage with art, to have their eyes opened. They come to museums like The Wilson to discover their past, the past of their local communities and of the people who have shaped it and shaped the generations who succeeded them; some of these people are still shaping the future as it comes (with ever increasing speed) to meet us.

To take just one example: Edward Wilson, whose father was largely responsible for establishing Cheltenham Museum. (The name of our art gallery and museum, The Wilson, honours both father and son.) 2022 will be the 150th anniversary of Edward Wilson's birth, and that anniversary is certainly one which needs celebrating, here in Cheltenham and much more widely, of course. But it is no longer just Wilson the intrepid explorer who died an heroic death who commands our attention. We need more than ever to learn from Wilson the artist and scientist who has so much to teach us about the beauty, importance and fragility of the polar environment, through his luminous paintings and his meticulous research into life on the Antarctic continent.

The trust is currently shaping next year's programme of events, activities and talks that will embrace aspects of Edward Wilson's legacy, and I hope that the Friends will be ready to sponsor one or more of the exhibitions that are being planned. I can tell you now that we are already paying for the complete restoration and conservation of a precious album of Wilson's drawing, letters and family memorabilia, and we also intend to pay for the conservation of possibly the most iconic of all the artefacts associated with Edward Wilson: the fur suit that he wore on his final Polar expedition. This much-needed work of conservation should be complete in time for the reopening.

Between 2017-2020, you'll recall we met the whole cost of a major Feasibility Study commissioned by the Cheltenham Trust to investigate ways of making The Wilson, its collections and its visitor experience more appealing and more financially sustainable. This proved to be a really valuable exercise. Among Purcell's conclusions and recommendations, which I am pleased to say the imminent refurbishment goes some way to addressing, were four I can summarise as follows:

- The need to make better use of the ground floor area both to create a much more welcoming and vibrant atmosphere and to signal clearly to visitors what there is to see on the upper floors and where to find it;
- The need to make better use of The Wilson's physical and cultural resources to generate a greatly enhanced level of income;
- The need to make better use of the existing space both in the galleries and in the museum area to display a much larger proportion of The Wilson's collections, and
- The need to encourage visitors to keep coming back, by rotating the art and artefacts on display and by celebrating The Wilson's

collections through special exhibitions (in-house and externally sourced) and by a rapidly increasing use of digital and online resources.

All of these, I believe, are areas of importance, and the last one seems to me an area in which we, the Friends, should be strongly engaged. We shall certainly want to sponsor the initial hanging of the Angelika Kauffmann portrait and any associated displays that will accompany it; sponsoring the creation of digital and online resources would, I suggest, also be an appropriate and valuable way of supporting The Wilson's work – a higher priority at this time and in the immediate future than the acquisition of further items for the art gallery's or for the museum's collections.

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I have been talking here about the tasks and opportunities that will present themselves when The Wilson is back in business with its doors open again, not only to visitors entering from Clarence Street, but now also from the Chester Walk entrance that should soon be welcoming visitors approaching from the new Minster Innovation Exchange and others arriving through the newly landscaped Minster churchyard area. Both of these partnership-funded projects, as I explained in the June News Update, are due to be completed – like The Wilson's – in April 2022.

But I do not want to give the impression that the Friends will be dormant until next Spring. Quite the opposite. A full programme of autumn and winter talks and events will soon be published, and I want to remind you of the date, Thursday 7th October, which I hope is already in your diaries. This is the date when all Friends are invited to come to a Reunion Reception to meet old friends and to welcome new members who have joined since the last New Members event, held as long ago as March 2019.

When we gather in October it will have been twenty months since we were last able to meet together. That occasion was the Reception in The Wilson to celebrate the memorable success of the Ernest Gimson exhibition. This Reunion Reception will be held in the Pittville Pump Room, and our guest speaker that evening will be Loyd Grossman. It would be easier to list the arts and heritage bodies of which he has *not* been a Chair or a trustee. No one in Britain today speaks with greater authority than Loyd Grossman on the importance of preserving and cherishing our heritage. It would be a fitting and appropriate way to celebrate our being able to meet once again, face to face, as Friends of The

Wilson, if we could very nearly fill a revitalised Pump Room. The trustees and I look forward to welcoming you all, most warmly, on October 7th. Until then, I end this Report, as I began it, by thanking you for your continuing support of the Friends during this past, unprecedented year.