

## Chair's Report AGM 2020

The job of the Chair at the AGM is to give you a report on the activities of the Friends of The Wilson during the year under review, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019- 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. Eleven of those twelve months were straightforward, with a number of notable highlights I shall discuss in a moment; however the last, March this year, saw the abrupt cessation of all Friends' activities, the closure of The Wilson (along with every other art gallery and museum in the country, and indeed, worldwide) and the start of a long and still very uncertain journey towards a new normality to which we are all having to adapt. I am sure you will want me to speak tonight about the future as well as the past, and this I promise to do. But the past first.

I must begin by referring to three people, Eunice Ida Phillips, Catriona Smith and Rosemary Parker, all of whom during the course of the past twelve months have left generous legacies to the Friends of the Wilson. Eunice Phillips, who had been a codebreaker at Bletchley Park during the War, was married to David Phillips, whom some of you may remember as the founding Chairman of the Everyman Theatre Association; Catriona Smith was a former Secretary of The Friends of The Wilson and someone closely involved also with the musical life of Cheltenham and with the Holst Birthplace Trust. Rosemary Parker was a prominent member of staff at the Cheltenham Ladies College where she was, I believe, Head of Science. I want to acknowledge the generosity of all three and to stress how greatly such bequests increase our ability to support The Wilson, which is (after all) the main reason for our existence as a charity and as a community of people with a shared interest in the arts as represented in and by our local art gallery and museum.

If supporting The Wilson is one of the main reasons why people like us join the Friends, another is undoubtedly to share in and enjoy the various activities that the Friends organise throughout the year – talks, outings, summer and Christmas events and other one-off occasions. For all of the above, I hope you will agree that last year had some notable highlights. Particularly memorable, perhaps, were the visits to the Earl of Oxford's home, Mells Manor in Somerset, to Wightwick Manor outside Wolverhampton and, in October, to Winchester Cathedral and the Sandham Memorial Chapel with its unforgettable murals by Stanley Spencer.

In July we had a second, highly enjoyable, summer visit to Chorley's Auction Rooms at Prinknash where Simon Chorley and Thomas Jenner-Fust treated us to two masterclasses: one on the problems of owning, selling and buying ivory objects at auction under current legislation and the other on how to spot the difference between genuine and fake silver antiques. These were followed by lunch prepared and served by members of the Friends' Events group while the afternoon was given over to valuation sessions and a private view of the Summer Sale. Our sincere thanks to Simon, Thomas and the staff at Chorley's for making us so welcome.

I mentioned just now our own Events Group, and I should like here to acknowledge the invaluable contribution they make behind the scenes to the success of the Friends year by year. Chaired by Sue Pearce, their job is to plan and administer our annual programme of talks, outings and events. Martha Alleguen, Alison Pascoe and Sue Reeves, though none of these three is a trustee, perform tasks for us without which it would be hard to imagine the

Friends of The Wilson existing at all. Martha and Alison between them look after all aspects of the bookings and (in more recent months) of the cancellations and refunds. Sue Reeves is in charge of the Friends' post room – if I may call it that. She meticulously plans the distribution by post of our Newsletter, supervising the dedicated small team who label and fill well over 500 envelopes in a miraculously short space of time, and then arranging for the envelopes to be franked by Gloucestershire University to ensure that they reach you as quickly as possible.

At this point I hope you are all aware that recently we have also been sending out a monthly update to keep you in touch with the Friends and with The Wilson during lockdown. We shall continue to do this at least to the end of the year, and probably thereafter. Whenever possible, we try to send out these updates not only by email but also to Friends who tell us they cannot access the internet. Martin and Martha share the work of putting these updates together and formatting them ready to be send out by the innocent-sounding but occasionally cunningly awkward system known as MailChimp. Sue Reeves single-handedly deals with the sending out of hard copies. I may say that the cost of all this in blood, sweat and tears (not to mention postage and stationery) is considerable; and this is voluntary work undertaken without complaint and largely without recognition. So I want on behalf of the trustees this evening to pay tribute to the work that the Events Group does and which deserves the gratitude of us all.

Outings, of course, generally take us away from Cheltenham. By contrast, I am delighted to report that during the last year the talks Sue Pearce organises now take place (as they surely should) in The Wilson itself, either as morning events with coffee and cake or after lunch with tea to follow, usually in the Friends' Gallery. You won't need me to tell you that the range and quality of speakers has been much appreciated. Friends who have attended these talks have been quick to tell us that it feels 'right' to have brought these key elements of our annual programme back 'in house'.

Something else that has been brought back in house, incidentally, is the catering at The Wilson – and across the Cheltenham Trust's other locations too. I am very pleased that we have been able to establish a positive partnership with the new team and with Jonathan Munoz, Head of Catering. This sense of partnership between the Friends and the Wilson is something I am very keen to foster and to develop further in a number of different ways. Let me give just three examples of how we have been doing this in the past year.

If you look at the Donations pages on our Friends of the Wilson website, you'll see that in 2019 we spent £35,538 from our non-restricted funds in support of the Art Gallery and Museum. We purchased one very significant acquisition – a letter from Queen Charlotte to one of her Ladies-in-Waiting commenting on arrangements for the forthcoming visit to Cheltenham of King George III in 1788. It is a charming and rather indiscreet letter by Her Majesty, and it makes an excellent companion to the more formal letter from the King himself which the Friends were able to purchase for the previous year.

I was delighted that we were able to celebrate the presentation of these two letters to the Wilson by hosting a special Friends Evening in the Summerfield Gallery last July: a reception followed by a showing of the Alan Bennett film, *The Madness of King George*, and then a

private view of the letters themselves in a special display in the Open Archive. This was also the first occasion on which the newly opened Roof Terrace, which offers one of the finest views in Cheltenham, was open. Incidentally, the decoration and furnishing of this very appealing space was also paid for by the Friends – something else to celebrate.

My second example of partnership can also be found in the 2019 list of donations: £24,000 to pay the first two instalments of the cost of the Feasibility Study commissioned by the Cheltenham Trust to establish the basis on which the Wilson could go forward in ways that maximised its existing resources and offered scope for a sustainable future. If you attended the AGM last year, you'll remember that I explained the thinking behind this very unusual grant by the Friends. You'll remember, too, that our guest speaker that evening was Niall Phillips of the architectural consultancy Purcell, who shared with us the findings and the vision emerging from that Feasibility Study.

I have no doubt at all, the Feasibility Study was worth every penny of the £35,000 it eventually cost, and I shall say something later in support of this conviction, a conviction that has only been strengthened by the one factor that the Feasibility Study took no account of – the Coronavirus pandemic and its consequences both for culture and the arts in general and for The Wilson in particular.

Before that, though, my third partnership example from 2019-2020. On 24<sup>th</sup> February we hosted a special reception to mark the conclusion of The Wilson's remarkable centenary exhibition *Ernest Gimson – Observation, Imagination and Making*. This was a home-grown show, devised and curated by Kirsty Hartsiotis, and presented with the enthusiastic help of all the museum staff. It was scholarly and accessible in equal measure, very well laid out with excellent labelling: as an exhibition it showed The Wilson at its best – Cheltenham, too, for that matter. Our reception was designed to say a big 'thank-you' to Kirsty and to The Wilson. It is a measure of how worthwhile it was perceived to be that Brewin-Dolphin – sponsors in the past of events as various as the Cheltenham Festivals, the Royal Welsh Show and the Cambridge Jazz Festival – offered to sponsor the Reception, at which Mary Greensted spoke about the legacy of such an exhibition and Kirsty Hartsiotis described just how much her colleagues had contributed to the whole enterprise – a real team effort. I am delighted to mention, at this point, that Mary Greensted has accepted the Trustees' invitation to become one of the patrons of The Friends of The Wilson. It would be hard to imagine a better ambassador than Mary.

I hope that each of these three examples illustrate what I mean by our growing partnership with The Wilson – funding acquisitions that add materially to the historical value of its collections; underwriting key developmental research for the future health and sustainability of Cheltenham's art gallery and museum, and simply saying thank-you publicly and with due celebration for all that The Wilson and its staff contribute to the town, to the region and, importantly, to British cultural life. We should not forget that our Arts and Crafts collection is designated a Collection of National Significance – and the Ernest Gimson exhibition served to remind us why this is so.

No one on that February evening could have imagined that less than a month later The Wilson would have closed, all events and exhibitions scheduled for the spring and summer

would have been postponed or cancelled and all but a core ‘business critical’ group of Cheltenham Trust staff, based at home, would have been put on furlough. As you know, staff on furlough must not continue to work. There has not been another period in the entire history of Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, when the building has been locked and the staff have been unable to work for so long. And when, after such a period, the doors are unlocked you cannot just turn on the lights again and expect the place to be the same as if you’d only been away for a weekend.

It is now more than four months since the lockdown began, and if you are wondering how soon the doors will open again I have to tell you that it is likely to be another four months at least; but when they do – all being well, before Christmas – you’ll notice at once a dramatic transformation. It’s of this that I’ll speak next.

Among the short-term recommendations of the Feasibility Study were the following: *first*, that more of the physical space within The Wilson should be used for displaying the art gallery and museum’s collections and, indeed, for rotating the displays more regularly, to give visitors an incentive to return more frequently; *second*, that the whole reception area (the foyer) should be redesigned to create a much more welcoming and inviting atmosphere; *third*, that the signage and flow of the building should be improved to make it easier to move through the galleries and exhibition areas; *fourth*, that every opportunity should be taken to maximise the revenue from the café, from the museum’s shop and from the marketing of spaces within the venue in order to help make The Wilson more sustainable.

Museums and galleries such as ours do not pay their own way; very few do, even at the best of times; so grant funding, whether from councils, from bodies such as Arts Council England or from other sources (including partner bodies such as ourselves, the Friends) will always be essential. Even before lockdown, funding had been obtained to create the new Maker Space, designed to complement the Arts and Crafts display by creating an area where practising artists and craftspeople can demonstrate their work and its links to the ideals of the arts and crafts movement, past and present. Had lockdown not happened, this new space would have been up and running since the end of April.

Also before lockdown, a local charity, the Charles Irving Trust, had approached the Cheltenham Trust with the offer of a very substantial legacy bequest. This bequest would make possible the creation of an appropriate permanent memorial to the late Charles Irving, a former mayor of the town and MP for Cheltenham. Discussions centred on the idea of a community gallery, and in the course of these discussions it became clear that an unexpected opportunity was opening up to implement some of the key recommendations of the Feasibility Study. I’ll quote here from the Press release put out earlier this month by the Cheltenham Trust:

The Cheltenham Trust and the Charles Irving Charitable Trust are delighted to announce a bequest that will enable an innovative new community exhibition gallery and exciting community arts café to be created at The Wilson Art Gallery and Museum.

The intention is that the mezzanine floor will now be converted into a fully equipped community gallery with a glass screen at the street end for sound proofing; at the same time the foyer area will be radically reconfigured with the removal of the information desk

and the creation of an extended arts café centred on this area. The necessary work will get under way as soon as possible and the museum and art gallery will not reopen until the transformation of the ground and mezzanine floors is complete.

This is an exciting and unexpected redevelopment project that has been fast-tracked while the building is closed. It means that when the doors do reopen, The Wilson will present a dramatically new face as soon as one enters. But galleries and museums cannot be static: new exhibitions and displays need months of planning and preparation. Following a successful application to the NLHF/ Arts Council England Emergency fund, some of the staff who work on the curatorial and programming activity of the art gallery and museum will be brought out of furlough before the end of October to enable the continuation of virtual activity and the provision of cultural offerings in other locations.

You will not need me to tell you that the past four months have had a startling impact on the financial health of all museums and public art galleries – some may never open again. That is not likely to be the fate of The Wilson, as it is part of a wider Trust that can generate income from its activities when it can fully remobilise and reopen. We have been in discussion with the Cheltenham Trust about ways in which we can help the art gallery and museum to get up and running again with a diverse and lively offering of exhibitions, activities and events. At the last meeting of the Friends' trustees, two weeks ago, the Trust's Chief Executive, Laurie Bell, spoke very candidly to us about the challenges that face The Wilson in the coming months and outlined ways in which the Friends could act as partners in helping The Wilson to re-establish itself as strongly and as rapidly as possible. Afterwards, we discussed at length what our response should be, bearing in mind that our responsibility as trustees is at all times to exercise due diligence in ensuring our funds are used wisely and appropriately for the purposes set out in our Constitution. At the end of the discussion we reached, I am glad to say, unanimous agreement that (I quote from the draft minutes of that meeting):

*The Friends of The Wilson are prepared to offer funds on a month-by-month basis to enable the Cheltenham Trust to make use of the opportunities arising from the opening of the new spaces and to develop a full programme once the Art Gallery & Museum is open again.*

This is an agreement in principle; the details in practice will involve our working closely with the Cheltenham Trust and the staff of The Wilson in the coming weeks and months. We look forward very much to doing this, and to making a real contribution to the museum's recovery. Here I should like to thank my colleagues who sit as trustees for their work on your behalf and for their commitment to the future of The Wilson.

Museums and galleries around the country – indeed, around the world – have never needed their friends and their Friends' organisations more than they do now. The Wilson is no exception. I am very glad that with your support, and with the help of those legacies of which I spoke at the outset, The Friends will be able to act in partnership with the Cheltenham Trust to secure a really good future for The Wilson.

*Adrian Barlow  
21 July 2020*

