

SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON

Anniversary Address by Paul Drury, President, 26 September 2020

Six months ago, back in March, I was beginning to think about this address when in the space of a week everything changed. I went from a jolly weekend in Norfolk, through a jittery site meeting in Kent mid-week, to lock down in Strawberry Hill by the end of it, with the Anniversary Meeting unavoidably postponed.

The Society's staff coped magnificently, giving the appearance to me, and especially to the outside world, of a seamless transition to home working, which continues to the extent that their work can reasonably be done from home.

We lost the remainder of the spring events programme to the pestilence, but the experience has not been entirely negative. Indeed, it has shown us how to accelerate our capacity for outreach going forward, as you will hear.

This afternoon, I will, as is customary, summarise our activities in 2019-20. But I will also address matters of consequence for the Society that have emerged over the past 6 months, and look forward to some of the issues that we must address going forward into 2021.

The national picture: Archaeology in Planning

Last year I reflected on the retrenchment in the organisations and institutions that are responsible for the conservation and study of England's material heritage. And the desirability of rethinking the organisation of development-led archaeology in England, to make best use of resources, and focus beyond data-gathering to delivering the public benefit of increasing knowledge of the past.

During the year, we developed a draft paper, *The Future of Archaeology in England*, which has circulated widely, through The Archaeology Forum (TAF), as a contribution to ongoing reflection on these issues. It would be fair to say that it was not universally welcomed across a sector understandably concerned with survival, and so inclined to support the *status quo*. The consequences of COVID-19 subsequently emerged as an additional and major concern.

But on 12 March the MHCLG published a White Paper, *Planning for the Future*, which sets out – albeit at a very general level – radical proposals for the reinvention and simplification of spatial planning in England, rather than further tinkering with a system that originated in 1947. Coupled with central government encouragement towards fewer, larger, single tier local authorities, this makes change to the present structure for managing the historic environment in general, and the archaeological resource in particular, inevitable.

'Beware of what you wish for', as the saying goes, especially since the word 'archaeology' nowhere appears in the White Paper. But our emerging view, based on the thinking we did last year, is that this reform presents an opportunity to improve the structural provision for archaeology in the planning system. Our response to the White Paper consultation is being

formulated on those lines, while our own paper, as refined, will be put formally into wider circulation shortly.

Support for Research and Conservation

Turning to our own activities during the year, in 2019-20 we offered just over £150,000 in research and travel grants (Fig 1), including a generous ongoing donation from our Fellow Edward Harris. This represents a considerable increase over the preceding 5-year average. The range of disciplines represented was, as ever, wide, but with archaeology predominant. A significant proportion of the projects supported are outside the UK, particularly in Oman as the de Cardi Fund grants are fully taken up (Fig 2). All periods are represented, from the Palaeolithic to the Victorian.

	2020	2015-19 average
No of applications	77	72
No of awards	37	34
Success rate	48%	44%
Average value of awards	£4,055	£3,690
Repeat applicants	16	Not collected
Total value of awards	£150,030	£123,243

Fig 1 2020 Research and travel awards compared to the 2015-19 average (Linda Grant)



Austria	1
Morocco	1
Turkey	2
Nigeria	1
Lebanon	1
Italy	2
UK	15
Oman	5
Pakistan	1
Russia	1
Romania	1
Jordan	1
Cyprus	1
Belize	1

Fig 2 2020 research awards by location of project (Linda Grant)

William and Jane Morris grants for the conservation of decorative or non-structural elements of churches continue to be over-subscribed. They were applied to the conservation of a wide range of items, as Fig 3 shows.

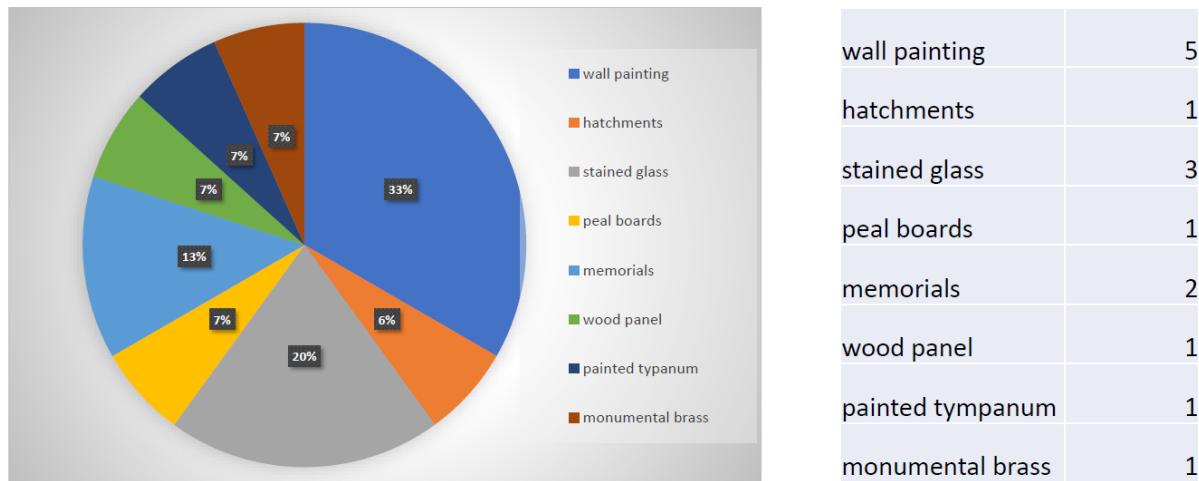


Fig 3 William and Jane Morris church conservation grants by object (Linda Grant)

In summary, our grants awarded totalled over £180,000. I wish we could give more but the low return climate for investments is getting worse rather than better.

Dissemination

Our live meetings last year all seem a long time ago now, part of a different world. We held a record number of public and participatory events through 2019-20, doubling attendance at our public lectures and events to over 4,000, thanks particularly to our Communications Officer, Danielle Wilson Higgins.

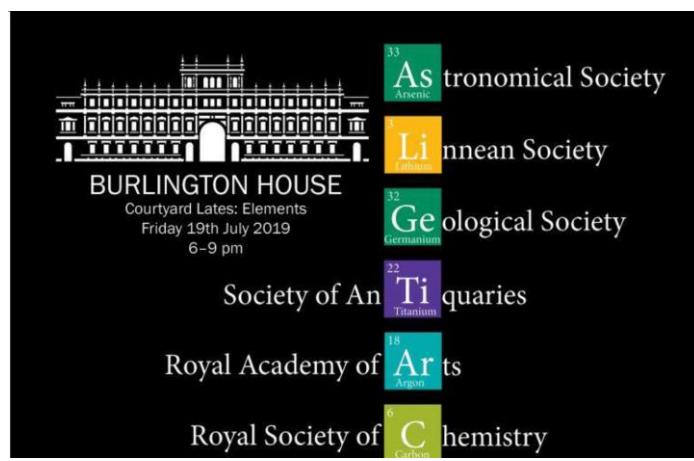


Fig 4 Burlington House Lates 2019

There is no time to cover all these events, so I will concentrate on a few highlights. Our annual Research Showcase was again popular; grant recipients set out their stalls in Burlington House to engage directly with Fellows and the public. People were enticed in from the Courtyard, some fascinated by our curious ways. This event again coincided with *Burlington House*

Courtyard Lates, when all six learned societies around the courtyard invited visitors to explore the theme of 'elements'. We had an engrossing evening of lectures in the Royal Academy Lecture Theatre (Fig 4). Our Postgraduate Open Day, where we introduce the potential of our collections to new researchers, is now a key event in the calendar, or rather it was before the pestilence.

In June 2019 we hosted, jointly with Arts and Humanities Research Council, a lecture by Chris Skidmore MP FSA, on *The Value of the Humanities to Universities and Contemporary Society*. At the time he was Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, but last year minsters came and went with disconcerting speed.

The Staffordshire Hoard colloquium, organised by Leslie Webster, Tania Dickinson and Sam Lucy, was the culmination of a decade-long research project into the hoard and coincided with the publication of *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure*. This was our 80th Research Report and has already gone to reprint. It was followed by *Vale of York Landscapes* (Report 81) and *Roman Aldborough* (Report 82). We now have 37 titles available online in open access through OAPEN and the ADS and continue the programme of making our backlist accessible in this way.

In March 2020 we held a seminar to mark International Women's Day, and to celebrate the centenary of the Society admitting female Fellows. *100 Years of Female Antiquaries*, with speakers highlighting the role of women within the Society past and present, was our last event before lockdown.

Embracing the virtual world

Over past few months, as a matter of necessity we have learned much about how to operate in the virtual world. Heather Sebire gave our first live-streamed public lecture on 19 June, *Stonehenge AD2020: Summer Solstice*. We had about 180 participants, almost twice the normal capacity of our meeting room, all able to put questions via the chat function – which many of them did.

Nothing can really take the place of being in the room with the speaker. But not everyone can be, now or indeed in normal conditions. So in future we will be live-streaming all our lectures, with much better production values than our historic recordings, giving real opportunity for virtual participation, and extending our reach beyond this room and indeed this country. Our next Public Lecture by Michael Wood already has 230 bookings, highlighting the potential of live streaming.

Unlocking our collections

Painful through it has been for many of us deprived of the library, despite the postal loan service, the cessation of normal work did enable our staff, led by our Head of Library and Collections, Dunia Maria Garcia-Ontiveros, to achieve a rapid transition of data to the new

library and collections platform and search engine. It is now vital that we follow through the IT investment with updating catalogues to modern standards, including more and better images online. As the nature of running the library changes following this investment, we are considering ways to expand and improve the way we manage and catalogue our records, particularly our Society's own archives. This has been close to my heart since I became President and I hope will be welcomed by all Fellows. We are now again able to offer (limited) personal access to the library. Thanks to the fortitude of our staff, we will maintain this unless instructed by government to close for business.

We are rightly proud of our collections as a resource. These are major steps to making them better known and above all accessible to researchers.

The Fellowship

Turning to Fellowship, I'm grateful for the overwhelming support for the Statute changes, reflected in the vote today. This will bring the Society into line with current good practice, appropriate and practical for an organization that numbers some 3,000 Fellows worldwide.

But numbers are not everything. We lack diversity; as an ancient white male, I'm conscious that I represent the very antithesis of it. A sample from our updated fellows database clearly shows our age profile, and how it has changed since 2005 (Fig 5).

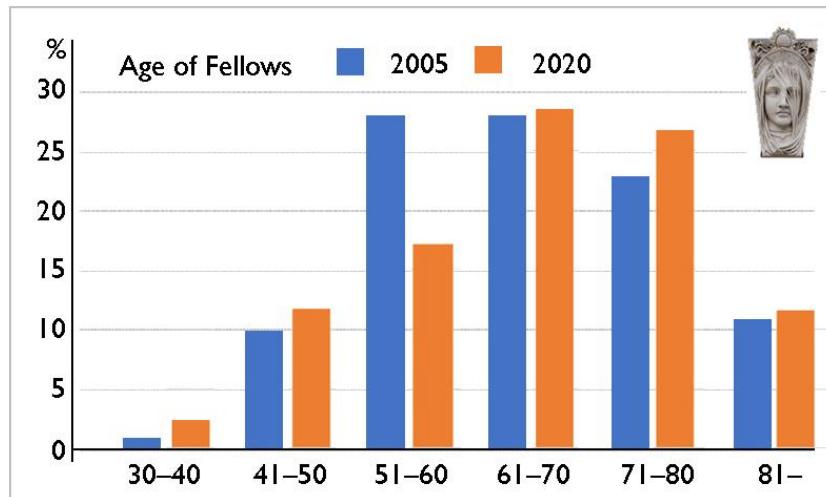


Fig 5 Age of Fellows, 2005 and 2020 (Nathalie Cohen FSA)

This data seems to reflect a situation in which, for a time around the turn of the century, election tended not to follow, for example, publication of a useful excavation monograph or post-thesis book, as it did when I was elected in the 1980s, but rather tended towards the honorific equivalent of a gold watch. In consequence the percentage of fellows aged 51-60 has fallen dramatically since 2005, and that bias will continue to work through our age profile going forward.

Elections and admissions now seem better to reflect wider society, particularly in their gender balance, but change is slow because as Fellows we naturally tend to propose people very like

ourselves. Recent events have prompted a wider reflection on the sources and human cost of the wealth of our predecessors. They have brought into focus the desirability, within, of course, our charter remit of *excellence* in our respective fields, of greater diversity and inclusivity among our Fellowship - as there is among our staff.

We should, I believe, eschew superficial, transient, or token gestures, but the long-term health of the Society depends on our diversity at least reflecting that of the academic and professional sectors which we represent. And not just in the British Isles but around the world, admittedly mostly the anglophone world, where our Fellowship is represented, and where in Australasia and the Americas we have established regional groups. I recently had the pleasure of participating in a Zoom meeting with our Australasian Fellows, where we discussed how to grow the group and its influence.

We recently set up a Diversity and Inclusivity Working Group chaired by Nathalie Cohen, to consider how to address the issue of the lack of diversity among our Fellowship. They have a maximum of three years to produce final recommendations, and hopefully interim ones along the way.

But of course, this is just one aspect of the need to grow the Fellowship, if we are to address a structural operating deficit of £150K pa and rising. So I urge, as I have before, all Fellows to put forward suitable candidates for election, not least because we have had precious few candidates since the onset of the pestilence. Please be reassured that under the emergency provisions adopted this morning, we are now able to hold virtual ballots despite the restrictions on physical meetings.

Kelmscott

Turning to Kelmscott, I spoke in 2019 in celebratory tone, with the fundraising for the major investment all but complete, the consents in place, and our staff and the architects raring to go. We let the contract for the work in November, and apart from some low-level winter flooding of the site, all was going well until the pestilence struck.

After lockdown, work was resumed on 11 May by our excellent contractor, Ken Biggs Ltd, but using fewer, socially-distanced, workers, about two thirds of previous capacity. The quality of work remains high and the delay of itself has not added to contract costs. But it has added a year to the programme. Planned limited opening of the house without contents, and the exhibition of 'Treasures from Kelmscott' at Burlington House, are both now pushed forward, from this year to 2021. And neither may happen if this grotesquely misnamed 'new normal' or worse still prevails through next summer.

The first full year of opening will now be 2022, but the sector view seems to be that visitor levels will not return to pre-Covid levels until 2024, so the reopening 'bounce' in visitor numbers will be missing. The main financial consequence is a year's loss of income. We are reworking business plan, and some assistance towards extra costs associated with the delay has already been secured, with further applications pending.

Meanwhile two opportunities have arisen at Kelmscott. First, we hope to carry out full rather than the specified temporary repair works to the Field Barn, for which we are fund-raising so that it can be included during the now extended contract period. Second, we have taken the opportunity to purchase from the Church Commissioners (who are selling their adjoining farm holding) the whole 10 acre field in which our car park stands, for £150,000 (Fig 6). That will give us long term security, save annual rent, and provide future opportunities to add to our offer. It also helps protect the setting of Kelmscott Church, the National Trust already owning the field behind the church. I sealed the contract on behalf of the Society this very day!



Fig 6 Field acquired at Kelmscott, north-east of the church

State of Society's Finances

Returning to the consequences of the pestilence, I must say something about finance generally. I have already mentioned the loss of income at Kelmscott. But most comparable organisations in the heritage sector, heavily dependent on visitor income, have been much worse hit, with major staff redundancies, including professional and curatorial staff. The National Trust has been in the news but others, like Historic Royal Palaces, are in a much worse position. We are relatively fortunate; the most serious consequence for us is the loss of income, normally more than £100,000 pa, from the letting of our meeting rooms here at Burlington House, mainly of course to kindred organisations.

The value of our investments and income from them has fallen, although both should recover with time.

The Society is also faced with unprecedented potential financial liabilities arising from the Universities Superannuation Scheme, which provides pensions for most of our staff. Market and interest rate movements have dramatically worsened the shortfall in the Scheme

To keep it afloat, the USS Trustees are proposing further increases in the employer contributions that are simply unaffordable, as well as a 'lock' that will prevent participating organisations from buying themselves out of the scheme, even if they could afford to do so, which we can't. We continue to take professional advice, but the options available to mitigate these risks are very limited.

Burlington House

Which brings me to the existential threat which has faced us for years and can no longer be ignored: Our tenure at Burlington House. Last year I explained the background to the problem of the rapidly escalating rent, under the terms of our lease from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as our government landlord. The consequent uncertainty since 2012 has prevented us from investing in Burlington House or making strategic plans about the Society's future, insofar as they are dependent on remaining there.

Confidential, constructive discussions with government were in progress when I last addressed the Fellowship. We hoped they would secure our future and that of the other Courtyard Societies at Burlington House. They did not, and I now feel free to summarise the sequence of events.

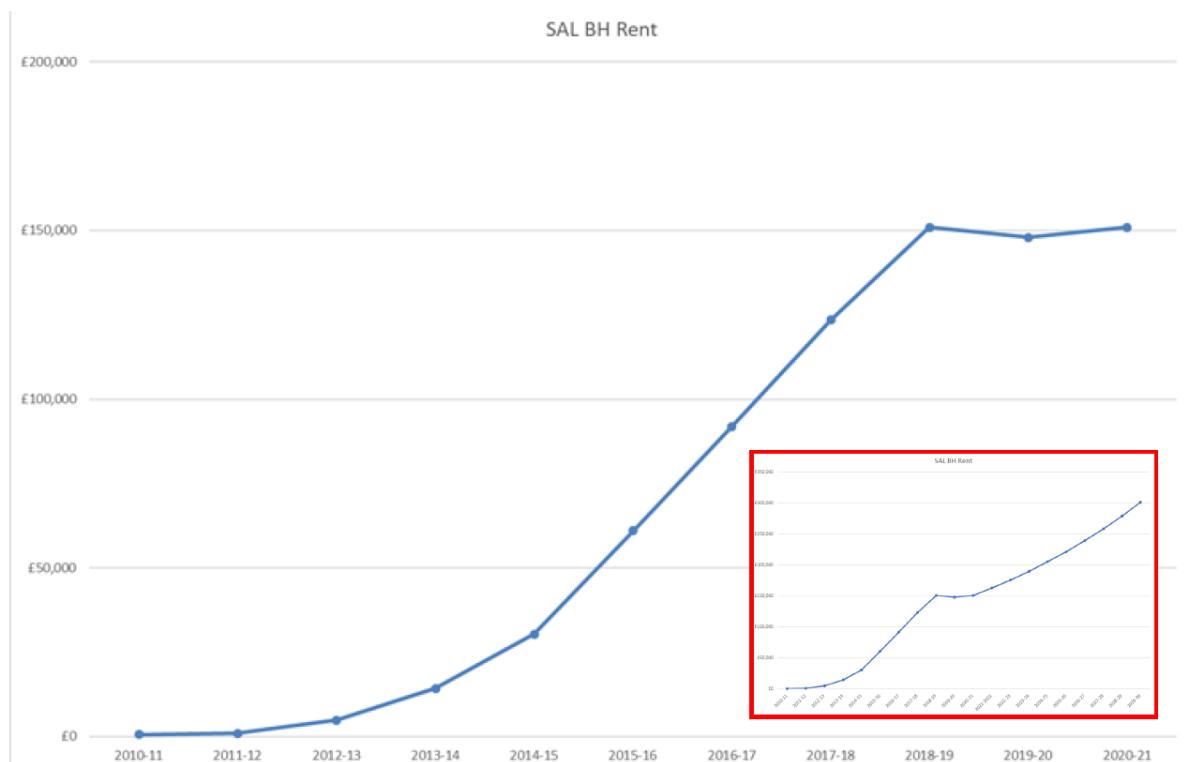


Fig 7 SAL Apartments in Burlington House: Rent Paid 2010-11 to 2019-20 and currently anticipated, based on quarterly demands to date, for 2020-21. The inset shows the effect of an 8% pa increase thereafter. If extended for 10 years (rather than the five years offered) the rent would double to c£300,000pa by 2030 (John Lewis)

The Societies approached the Ministry with the proposition that we wished to negotiate a long lease at a peppercorn rent, on a 'best value' basis which recognised the public value of the Societies in their historic central London location. The then minister proposed instead that we be given such a lease as a grant, if could demonstrate our public value through a report from Price Waterhouse Cooper, following Treasury guidelines. We did so, but eventually it became clear that the minister had been over-ruled by officials.

Our rent last year was reduced partly to reflect the consultancy costs (Fig 7), and a new minister offered (with official backing this time) to peg our rental increases at 8%pa compound for five years. The potential effect of that is shown on the inset graph. The Courtyard Societies countered with an offer to purchase such a lease for the current 'Fair Value' of the property in the Ministry's books, ie a value that assumed that our right under our lease to an 80 year tenure would run its course. Our share of that would be some £5.5m. We further suggested that part of this might be met by the transfer of ownership of a very few objects to the national collections in which they have been on loan (and display) for decades (although that was not critical to the proposal).

This offer was, as we originally intended, grounded in the concept of 'Best value', taking into account our public value to the nation. It was rejected on the basis, essentially, that it was artificially low; and that because of the escalating rent, the Ministry could soon foresee having vacant possession, which would allow them to realise the open market value of £110-£120 million of the Courtyard buildings, whether by sale or proportionate rent. The suggestion regarding the objects was dismissed on the grounds of 'not wanting to set a precedent', despite transfer of objects being an established way of settling Inheritance Tax liabilities.

Council has decided that we should make one final attempt to persuade government that they should take into account our £5.4m pa public value, this time through a Public Campaign. We have engaged *April 6*, a specialist communication and campaigns agency, to help us in this, and we will be finalising the details in the next couple of weeks.

We know that the Society has a strong case and evidence to present through the economic analysis of our public contribution to the nation. For good reasons, Government built these apartments for the Society 150 years ago, to replace those which it had previously provided at Somerset House, and those reasons have not fundamentally changed.

The cost of an affordable lease to Government would be nominal compared to the value of the activities, programmes, events and research which take place at Burlington House. The Government's desire to force what they say is market rent, which is based on a flawed assessment, would only raise a nominal amount of money, whilst sacrificing a unique arrangement which has shown demonstrable benefit to the nation.

In the coming weeks, we will ask and explain how you can help the campaign to exert pressure on ministers, with the belief that an arrangement acceptable to both the Society and Government can be found. If we do not succeed, the Society really must leave Burlington

House and seek a congenial berth elsewhere. We are rich in assets, in both scholarly and market terms, but cash poor. There lies the dilemma we must face. But I for one would be saddened not to see our flag flying on St George's Day, over these apartments which bear our name over the door.

Thanks

Finally I must thank our Officers (Stephen Dunmore, Chris Scull, Heather Sebire), Members of Council, Committee Members, our General Secretary John Lewis and all our staff and volunteers at Burlington House and Kelmscott, for their unfailing hard work, especially in the exceptional circumstances of the past six months.