

SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON

Anniversary Address by Paul Drury, retiring President, 24 June 2021

Last year, we were six months late in holding the Anniversary Meeting; this year only three, on both occasions hoping to meet in troughs between the viral waves. Despite the constraints, I'm pleased to see some of you here in person, and I hope many more have joined us online.

Even were it to disappear tomorrow, Covid-19 has now shaped our lives for long enough to leave permanent effects on the way society in general, and this Society in particular, will function in the future. We have all had a crash course in digital communication. All forward planning has become provisional and will likely remain so for some time yet. In these trying circumstances, the Society's staff, largely working from home, have continued to respond with notable skill and enthusiasm. I'm profoundly grateful for their constructive responses to the difficulties, and particularly for seizing the opportunities for innovation offered by the pandemic.

The close of my term is an opportunity to take stock of the challenges, and consider the opportunities, that face the Society after an unprecedented period of disruption to our established ways of working. It is fashionable to see disruption as beneficial, in provoking and accelerating change. The challenge of course is to steer change in directions positive both for the Society and the sectors in which our Fellows operate. Delivering positive change will inevitably be a major preoccupation of Martin Millett, my successor.

The Ethical Conduct Body

Following the changes to our statutes last year, our Ethical Conduct Body is now established, with appointments through an open and competitive process. In effect it has ultimate responsibility for upholding the Society's reputation, both externally and among the Fellowship itself. The chair is our Fellow, Simon Morris, who is a solicitor, and it includes seven other Fellows and five external members. I'm very grateful to all of them for agreeing to serve—though I do hope that they won't have too many calls on their time and expertise! The details, approved by Council in May, are now on our website.

Communications

The Society, particularly Danielle,¹ moved quickly last year to live-stream our lectures and conferences, open to anyone registering to attend. The shift hugely expanded our outreach, with live on-line participation being typically measured in hundreds rather than tens (Fig 1). This has greatly raised awareness of what we do and who we are, both in Britain and beyond, reinforcing our international remit and aspirations.

¹ Danielle Wilson-Higgins, the Society's Communications Manager.

I hope too that it has helped to 'demystify' us, since the time-honoured formal 'Ordinary Meeting' that precedes the lecture is included in both the live version and on our YouTube channel.

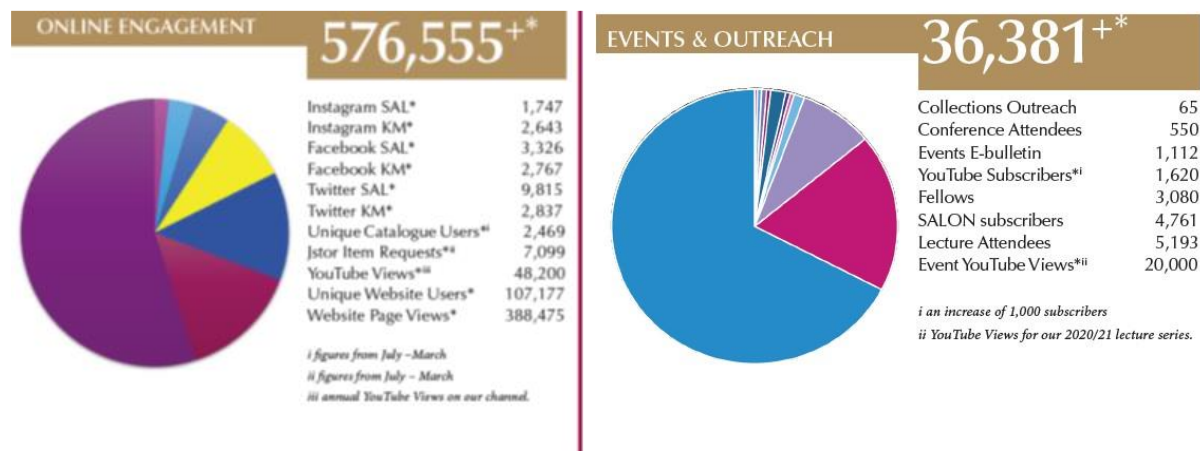


Fig 1 A summary of the Society's communications impact, 2020-21 (Danielle Wilson-Higgins)

Technology, of course, cannot entirely substitute for a live meeting, and the interactions that take place in its margins. To the extent that restrictions ease and confidence grows, competition for people's attention will inevitably grow. But we have already made the decision, and the investment, to live stream all our lectures and conferences in the future, including those held outside London, to try to combine the advantages of in-person and virtual meetings. This will also allow us to invite speakers from distant locations without prohibitive costs for us or them, and so maintain and grow participation in our Ordinary Meetings, where we have seen particular interest from the near continent and Scandinavia.

We have maintained, and intend to maintain, a distinction between lunchtime 'public' lectures, by experts but aimed at a general audience, and evening lectures – Ordinary Meetings – disseminating the results of recent and ongoing specialist research. The audience figures achieved reflect the distinction, with proportionately higher 'live' participation in Ordinary Meetings, compared to a very high proportion of subsequent viewings of the 'public' lectures. Pre-pandemic, we had successfully trialled offering some seats at Ordinary Meetings to interested non-fellows, not least because attendance by Fellows and their guests could on occasion be embarrassingly low. Opening these meetings in the future should be the norm, assuming that the appetite to attend live meetings in central London returns. Access to our lectures goes to the heart of our charitable purpose to disseminate the results of emerging research on the human past.

Conferences, too, have been online, with *Seals and the people of Britain* attracting 550 live attendees, and *Lost frontiers and drowned landscapes* nearly 1,400, with another 2,300 subsequent views. Our meeting room holds 100 at best, and while I do hope to see it full again, the value of live streaming is obvious, opening these events to people who could not

justify the cost or time of travelling to London, let alone the growing hassle of negotiating our secure European border.

Library and collections

Turning to our library and collections, the expansion of access to digital resources, including JSTOR, has been much appreciated by users, and most of these resources will be made permanently available. The disruption of the pandemic, with its absence of physical readers, ironically enabled Dunia² and her team to make rapid progress the switch to our new collections management system.

Its 'front end', *Collections Online*, recently went live in Beta version.³ It searches across all our collections by interrogating the new library catalogue, the e-resources index and the archives and objects catalogue. This is a major milestone, giving us a platform on which the records of our archives and collections will be expanded and enriched into the future. As routine library management has been streamlined (barcodes have arrived!), we have been able to appoint an archivist, currently adding new records for our institutional archive.⁴

This fantastic resource opens up a world of possibilities for us to share our collections and attract new audiences. Experience elsewhere suggests that the greater the visibility of our collections, the more researchers will become aware of them and be motivated to engage with them personally. The challenge now is to sustain the pace and involve more Fellows in updating the catalogue entries for collection items in their areas of expertise. I've promised to update the medieval floor tile catalogue.

An affiliate scheme

The dramatic acceleration of our outreach and engagement – our 'audience development' - through lectures and events gives us a unique opportunity to consolidate and build on the following we have gained.

Council decided in March that we should seize the opportunity to launch a category of membership – working title, 'affiliate' – by the end of this year. Three years ago, we decided in principle that this was desirable, after establishing the power to do so through the 2014 statute reform, and indeed more than half a century of intermittent discussion. We held back because of the uncertainty about our tenure at Burlington House, and perceptions that access to it would need to be a reasonably secure part of the offer.

The pandemic has emphasised that our core appeal is intellectual access to our resources - through lectures, conferences, the library and collections, our publications, and of course our

² Dunia Garcia-Ontiveros, the Society's Head of Library and Museum Collections.

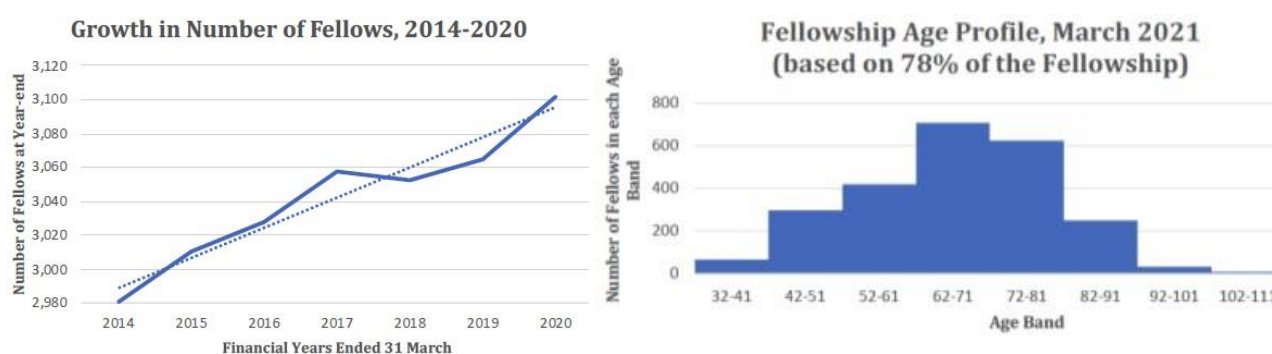
³ [Society of Antiquaries Collections Online | Home \(sal.org.uk\)](https://www.sal.org.uk/collections-online)

⁴ The removal of the long-superseded card index cabinets from the library, to its architectural benefit, is a tangible expression of this process of modernisation.

Fellows. Widening access and participation at an affordable price should appeal to many, from early career scholars to the interested public. The aim is to increase the number of people regularly accessing our resources and contributing to the cost of providing them.

The Fellowship

Last year, I emphasised the increasingly urgent need to grow and diversify our aging Fellowship. Since 2014 elections each year have averaged 111, with an average net annual growth of 20, reaching 3,101 by March 2020. Our age profile, which is probably underestimated by the diagram (Fig 2) because of data bias, suggests that our trajectory will soon flip to a net annual reduction. It probably has already done so, since because of potential hardship we have not enforced amoval for non-payment of subscriptions during the pandemic.⁵ Without rapid action, Fellowship income, already too low to sustain the Society's activities, will fall further. While our subscription has increased by about 5% in real terms over the past 20 years, thus holding its value, benchmarking against comparable bodies and feedback from Fellows suggests little scope for a significant real-terms increase.⁶



Profile of the Fellowship, 2021

Annual Movement in the Number of Fellows, 2014 to 2020 plus Provisional 2021 Number								
Financial Year Ended	Number at Year's Start	Resignations	Amovals	Deaths	New Fellows Elected	Movement Year on Year	Number at Year End	Year on Year Increase
31.3.14	2,923	-18	-11	-28	115	58	2,981	1.98%
31.3.15	2,981	-40	-8	-70	147	29	3,010	0.97%
31.3.16	3,010	-22	-3	-64	107	18	3,028	0.60%
31.3.17	3,028	-27	-2	-33	91	29	3,057	0.96%
31.3.18	3,057	-35	-26	-86	142	-5	3,052	-0.16%
31.3.19	3,052	-27	-2	-33	75	13	3,065	0.43%
31.3.20	3,065	-45	0	-21	102	36	3,101	1.17%
31.3.21	3,101	-40	0	-46	73	-31	3,070	-0.97%

Fig 2 Key Fellowship statistics, 2021 (Jonathan Rounce). Note the amoval for non-payment of subscriptions for 2020 and 2021 are in abeyance

My successor will be leading thinking about how we can grow the Fellowship, within the charter criterion of 'excellence', supported by a Fellowship Committee to be established for the purpose. Initial thoughts include inviting individuals who clearly meet our criterion to

⁵ Losses through resignation (see Fig 2) and lapse seem to fit a general trend during the pandemic.

⁶ Statistics and diagrams taken from Jonathan N Rounce FCA, *Growing the Fellowship & Introducing a Membership Scheme*, second draft, 23 April 2021.

apply, and indeed facilitating applications for Fellowship. Such routes could be structured as alternative means of achieving a proposer and supporting Fellows, before going to ballot as usual.

The need for change is not solely to sustain and grow the Fellowship, but also to ensure greater diversity among the Fellowship. We should at least reflect the diversity of the background of established practitioners across the fields of study we represent.

Burlington House

Our enforced separation from Burlington House over most of the past year has helped put our relationship with our historic home in perspective. Its functionality can be improved with major investment but will always be sub-optimal in everything but its central London location.

Last year, I recounted the sorry saga of events through 2019 and 2020, leading to the rejection of the Learned Societies' offer to purchase long leases at the then 'Fair Value' at which New Burlington House (NBH) was held in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government accounts. That value assumed that the sequence of leases up to a total of 80 years to which the Society is entitled under the 2005 initial lease would be taken up. For us and the majority of the courtyard societies, our rent is already unaffordable, so in reality the reversion would fall into the Ministry's hands much sooner. Since then, our rent for 2022 has been assessed at £204,142.50, representing about a third of market rent, and the proportion of the 'Fair value' of the whole at 31 March 2021 represented by our apartments stood at £5.83m, up from £5.5m at the time of our offer.

In September we engaged the agency *April 6* to help devise and manage a public campaign, in a final attempt to persuade government of the net public benefit of a long-term solution which keeps the Societies in their historic homes. Our campaign launched in November. All of you will have seen the messaging, and I was delighted with the response of so many Fellows who put the case to their local MPs. From January, the Linnean Society, Geological Society and Royal Astronomical Society followed our lead by initiating their own campaigns, so once again the majority of the Societies are acting jointly. Our Fellow Tim Loughton MP leads a cross-party parliamentary group on *The Future of the Learned Societies at Burlington House* and managed to secure a Westminster Hall Debate on 8 June,⁷ which has been widely reported.

However, real progress with the Ministry has been very limited. On 5 May they wrote to us offering to vary the formula used to calculate the annual rent, which would give certainty about the rate of increase of the rent (3% per annum) between five-yearly rather than annual revaluations. The percentage of market rent payable would increase by 5.75% at each revaluation and the market rent itself would be rebased to its then-current level, if that is greater than the passing rent (an 'upwards only rent review'). This is little different in principle

⁷ For the transcript see [Learned Societies at Burlington House - Tuesday 8 June 2021 - Hansard - UK Parliament](#)

from the offer of a fixed 8% annual increase for 5 years offered last year. It would also require us to seek funding to increase public access and outreach, which we are keen to do, but we would not have a sufficient interest in the building to provide security to raise funds to make this possible. It further requires us to 'identify alternative sources of revenue and operational changes to achieve greater long term financial security', ie pay the escalating rent. If such sources existed, we would have exploited them long ago. The offer completely fails to understand the nature and purpose of the learned societies.

The Societies have responded that they cannot meet these demands. Our counter-suggestion is that NBH be regarded by government as a heritage asset, not as an investment property. Whether retained by Government or, as others like Somerset House have been, transferred on long lease to a charitable trust established for the purpose, this could secure the long-term integrated management primarily for public benefit of the whole Burlington House estate. But whether from government or such a trust, we and the other Learned Societies need to buy long leases of our apartments at nominal rent, to give us both security and a sufficient legal interest to be able to draw in perhaps £4-5 million (from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and other donors) to invest in and modernise the building, to the extent that its II* listing allows. That would allow us to enhance public access to our resources, physical and intellectual (accepted as a common objective between the Societies and government), provide a secure and appropriate environment for our library and collections, and provide excellent facilities for our staff, Fellows and visitors.

We made clear at the outset of the current negotiations in 2019 that we expected to pay a significant premium for a long lease. It was the then minister, Jake Berry, who proposed giving the Societies such leases without payment, which unsurprisingly provoked the Treasury to refuse (and who may believe that it was our idea). We also suggested (later) that ownership of some of our objects, principally those on long term loan to national collections, might be transferred to government in part payment, analogous to the acceptance in lieu scheme. One of them is the Becket Casket, currently part of the British Museum's Becket 850th anniversary exhibition. DCMS refused to countenance this for fear of setting a precedent, but our offer was not dependent on it.

We do, of course, hope for a resolution of this matter that allows us to remain at Burlington House, for a sum that is no greater than the considerable cost of moving elsewhere. But we are actively investigating, in detail, the costs of relocation, 'Plan B'. We cannot reasonably pay to stay at Burlington House more than the cost of acquiring and moving to a building well placed outside the centre, or in a provincial city with a congenial academic community. It would be difficult to justify to the Charity Commission – as we would be bound to do – competing with the market in the most expensive patch of real estate in the country, even if we could afford to do so. But I still hope that we may persuade the government that greater public value would flow from our remaining in Burlington House.

Financial matters

Turning to financial matters generally, the pandemic has meant that our loss of income from room hire at Burlington House has continued through the year, and we have lost a year's income from Kelmscott. Hence, we have worked hard to secure Covid-related emergency funding, with two successful grant applications - £75,000 from the Cultural Recovery Fund towards our online upgrades for lectures and equipment for digitising our collections, and £40,000 from the NLHF's Covid-19 Emergency Fund towards operational costs.

With the onset of Covid last April the value of our investments and the income generated fell dramatically. But since the autumn they have recovered, although the markets remain volatile. And, of course, we are gradually eating into our capital to pay the escalating rent at Burlington House.

The other threat to our financial sustainability, the potential liabilities from the shortfall in the Universities Superannuation Scheme, still hangs over us. The contribution rates recently proposed for employers and employees are regarded by almost all employers as completely unrealistic, although there are now signs of some progress in negotiations between the USS Trustees and Universities UK. We have taken what steps we can to mitigate the risks, creating a new company, Lampada, to employ new staff joining the Society, who can then enrol in a different pension scheme, affordable both to them and to us.

Kelmscott Manor

At Kelmscott, which by contrast with Burlington House we own and for which have attracted major funds for investment, the physical repair and the transformation of public and educational facilities is now nearing completion.



Fig 3 The Kelmscott Campaign Group site visit, June 2021

The final works stage, the internal decoration of the house, is about to begin, and the house will open, before the contents are returned, for a short season in September. Because of the ongoing pandemic, our hope of mounting a 'Treasures of Kelmscott' exhibition at Burlington House this summer had to be abandoned. Despite Covid, our contractor, Ken Biggs, has sustained a notably high standard of work, within budget.

Additional staff to deliver the activities strand of our NLHF grant have been appointed, and we look forward to full reopening in Spring 2022. The challenge now is to attract enough visitors, post-pandemic, to break even in revenue terms, and begin to generate the surplus from which to set aside funds to address the next 25 to 30 year repair cycle. I have no doubt that the Society will be able to do so, and through the education and engagement programme, including community archaeology, encourage many more people to explore the past through the lens of Kelmscott and Morris.

Supporting research and conservation

Kelmscott may be our own 'demonstration site', but demand for our grants to support research and conservation by others has been maintained, even if some funded projects have been delayed.

	2021	2015-20 average
No of applications	45	77
No of awards	32	34
Success rate	71%	44%
Average value of awards	£7,297	£3,872
Total value of awards	£233,510	£136,636

Fig 4 2021 Research and travel awards compared to 2015-20 average (Linda Grant)

In 2020-21, we offered £233,510 in research and travel grants. That is a notable increase over 2020, when we offered £123,243. It was primarily due to a decision to institute major awards using a growing balance in the Janet Arnold Fund, which supports in-depth study of the history of dress and the materials from which it is made. We made four major awards totalling about £94,000. The call for applications emphasised the potential scope of this Fund, allowing us to support innovative and exciting projects, on subjects ranging from professional Tudor embroidery to Modern Chinese Fashion.

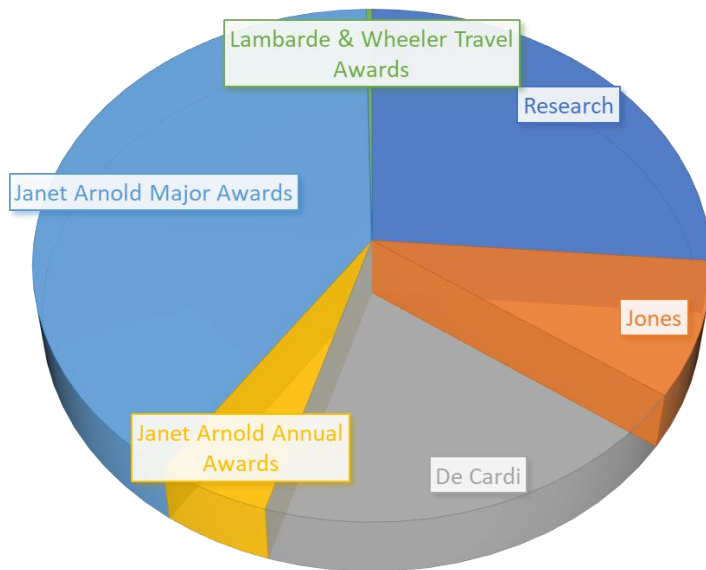


Fig 5 Research grants awarded, February 2021, by fund (Linda Grant)

Most of our research funds are constrained by the terms of their bequests as to the subject matter and geographical location of eligible projects. As usual, most applications related to archaeological projects in the traditional sense, albeit wide-ranging in location and subject. Despite our encouragement of other disciplines, in 2021 there were fewer applications than expected from historians.

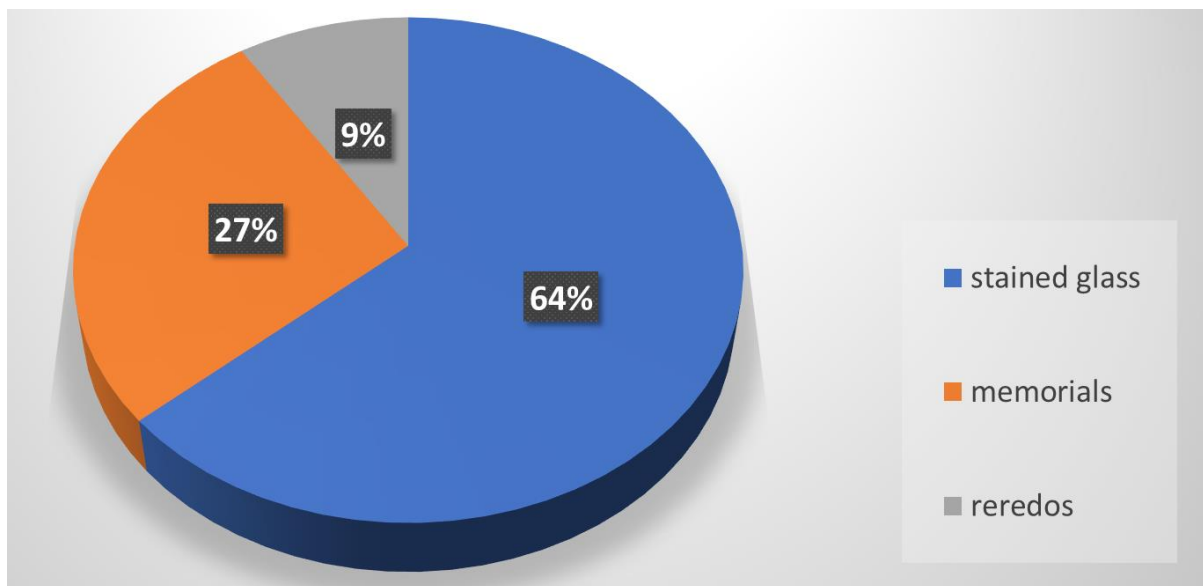


Fig 6 Morris Grants awarded October 2020 and March 2021 (Linda Grant)

William and Jane Morris grants for conservation of church fittings are more limited financially - £23,400 this year. Projects we helped to fund included the Bishop Marshall panel at Llandaff Cathedral, all that remains of his 1480 archepiscopal throne; and the late 15th century Doom painting at St Thomas of Canterbury Church, Salisbury.

Publications

We published two new monographs exploring aspects of Roman Yorkshire. *Isurium Brigantum: An Archaeological Survey of Roman Aldborough* by Rose Ferraby and Martin Millett pieces together the evidence for the former administrative capital of the Brigantes, while *Landscape and Settlement in the Vale of York* by Steve Roskams and Cath Neal is based on archaeological investigations at Heslington East.

Our monograph *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure* has made a significant impact. It was joint winner of the 2021 Historians of British Art Book Award; was named in 2021 as Best Book by the International Society for the Study of Early Medieval England; and is short-listed for the Current Archaeology Book of the Year 2021 Award. A third printing is currently underway - perhaps a record for an archaeological report?

The *Antiquaries Journal* reached its centenary volume in 2020, its contents demonstrating the global reach and historical breadth of the Society's interests. The challenge going forward is to manage the transition to a substantially open-access publication, to meet the demands of research funding bodies. More of our monograph back catalogue is being made freely available online. We are also considering the feasibility of reviving *Archaeologia* as a primarily on-line vehicle for publishing papers that fall, in length, between the *Journal* and a monograph.

Influencing Public policy

Archaeology

In November last year, we published a manifesto, *The Future of Archaeology in England*,⁸ as a contribution to the ongoing debate focused on optimising the public benefit from primarily commercial archaeology. In the coming months, we will be contributing to discussion and hosting events on the issues. The urgency of addressing long standing problems, including consistent local authority curatorial provision and the curation of archives, has been focused by the government's decision to proceed with the radical and increasingly controversial reinvention of the spatial planning system trailed in last year's White Paper.⁹

University provision for archaeology

The study of archaeology in our universities is also under pressure, as the study of STEM subjects, and the funding for them, is being privileged over the humanities, including history and archaeology, despite the latter having a major and increasing science component. The combination of reduced central funding for archaeology courses and falling student applications means that universities, as businesses, must consider cuts to related teaching

⁸ [Future of Arch.pdf \(sal.org.uk\)](https://sal.org.uk/future-of-arch.pdf)

⁹ *Planning for the future*, MHCLG, March 2020

staff and, in some cases, closing or merging departments. Proposals at Chester and more recently Sheffield have appeared in the press. It is not the role of the Society to second guess the individual outcomes, but we are concerned that unique areas of expertise, particularly scientific expertise, are not lost in a series of *ad hoc* decisions shaping a field where some rationalisation is inevitable.

Contested Heritage

During the year, 'contested heritage' has been a notable public issue. The Society responded with a position statement on our website, intended to prompt constructive debate among Fellows.¹⁰ Our approach is determined by our published Values - in particular, the equal rights and status of multiple communities in their relationship with heritage, and the relevance of heritage as a resource fundamental to senses of identity. On 19 June we held an on-line conference, *Intertwined Histories: The Legacies of Colonialism and Empire*, the launch event for a series of panel discussions on related themes, including diversity in UK heritage, during the coming year.

Priorities for the future

Finally, I want to summarise what I believe should be among our priorities for the next three years and beyond.

As I've outlined, the impact of the pandemic on the Society's activities has so far been mixed; losses, of course, but also innovations, accelerated technological progress and dramatic audience development. Mainly, thanks to the flexibility and commitment of our staff, we have seen that the Society is resilient, able to respond rapidly and effectively to drastic changes of circumstance.

We need to continue on this path of radical and effective action to address matters which, though less dramatic than the pandemic, will otherwise insidiously undermine us. The most important, I believe, is to try to sustain our hard-won on-line following, build on it through affiliate membership, and grow the Fellowship in real terms, addressing our lack of diversity in the process. We must invest in growth to ensure our relevance and our viability into the future and counter the demographic time-bomb of our current Fellowship profile.

Next, the Burlington House question must be settled, for it has distracted our energies and consumed our resources for far too long. If, despite our best and final efforts, the government continues to hold its line, and will not come to an agreement that reflects the public value and potential of the co-located Learned Societies and their collections, as well as the value of Burlington House to the Societies, then we must move, and do so by 2025. Otherwise, we will become the proverbial boiled frogs, our capital eroded, our ambitions, energy and resources drained and constrained by a tired and dysfunctional, but increasingly expensive,

¹⁰ [SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON \(sal.org.uk\)](https://www.sal.org.uk)

building. We have shown at Kelmscott that we can summon both the vision and the funds to invest heavily in a building that we own. Whether by buying a lease at a price that reflects the value of BH to advancing our charitable purposes (including modernising the place), or doing so elsewhere, we have a track record of success and experience – think of Kelmscott as a trial run for the main event....

Looking to the sector beyond the Society, credit is due to the Government for its emergency financial support, to enable organisations to adapt to the pandemic conditions and hopefully recover and survive beyond it. But for local authorities, in particular, across their heritage roles from supporting museums to managing the historic environment (particularly archaeology) in the planning system, the potential impact of now inevitable years of ‘fiscal responsibility’, following a decade of public austerity, cannot be other than a major concern for the sector. The Society must continue to speak strongly to try to influence public policy as a major actor and provide an independent forum for public debate.

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 at Burlington House and Kelmscott, for their unfailing hard work, especially in the exceptional circumstances of the past year.

POSTSCRIPT: Geographical distribution of the Fellowship

Information about the geographical distribution of our Fellowship was sought in a question following the address. The data is presented below, summarised on two maps.

