**Anniversary Address**

**27 April 2023**

**Martin Millett**

This is my second Anniversary Address as President, by my reckoning this is the 272nd

Anniversary Meeting since our Royal Charter was granted in November 1751. It provides an opportunity to mark the achievements of, and key moments in the history of the Society, as well as providing a forum for the President to talk more broadly about the environment within which our Society and its Fellows operate. With this in mind, I will divide my address into two parts, the first looking at the achievements of the past year, the second looking forward and reflecting on some broader themes.

**The Society in 2022–23**

I do not want to repeat the detail that has already been circulated in our annual report in its new look as *The Antiquary* (but I would like to compliment the staff and Fellows who have worked to produce it).

It has been a very busy year, with several initiatives that have been long in development coming to fruition, marking significant efforts by the Society’s staff and many Fellows. We celebrate these achievements, noting that behind the scenes the long struggle to secure a sustainable future at Burlington House has continued to absorb much staff and officers’ time.

**Kelmscott Manor, first season after reopening**

This time last year we noted the completion and reopening of Kelmscott Manor following the HLHF-funded refurbishment. Through Kelmscott, the Society is fulfilling its core aims of conservation, research, and their communication to a broad public. It was a delight to see the Manor re-opened to visitors for the summer season. With three public opening days a week and a good summer, we exceeded our admissions target, welcoming just under 27,000 visitors. The new learning barn allowed the us to accommodate school and community groups and to develop an education programme that seeks to enthuse future generations. Alongside this, staff are working with Cotswold Archaeology on a community archaeology project which seeks to engage the villagers, local schools, and volunteers in research on the environs of the Manor.

**Affiliate Membership**

Our second long-discussed development saw the launch of a new Affiliate Membership scheme on 1st July. Through this the Society aims to achieve broader public benefit, enhancing access to people with a general interest in our subjects, diversifying access and developing wider, long-lasting support for the Society. We exceeded our recruitment target for Year 1, with a total of 305 new members reported to Council in March. We have welcomed many of them to the library and to our our meetings. We are enormously grateful to Fellows for supporting the scheme by sharing the details with friends and colleagues who would most benefit from a close relationship with the Society.

**Ballot reform**

This year we also agreed and have begun to implement a modest reform of our Fellowship balloting system which removes practical constraints on the number of Fellows that we can elect in any one year, whilst also providing a way in which individuals can express an interest in being nominated for Fellowship. It is too soon yet to see whether these measures will result in an increase in the size of the Fellowship, which currently remains steady at 3088. As I noted in my Address last year, our future sustainability does rely in part on increasing the size of our Fellowship.

**Strategic Review**

As promised in my Address last year, over the past months a substantial amount of work has gone into a strategic review. This has been discussed at a series of seminars and the draft was presented to the Fellowship at a meeting on 23rd March, eliciting some very useful feedback that has been taken into account in arriving at the final version, signed off my Council, and now on the Society’s website. I will return to some of its key themes later in this Address, but here I would like to thank the staff, officers and members of Council who contributed to these discussions.

Alongside these achievements, we have also continued with the routine business of the Society. We continue to make substantial **grants and awards** (£138K this year). It is always a pleasure to see the results of the funded work, whether through lectures, publications or the reports that are sent to us from churches that have received Morris Fund grants.

Our **Library, Archive and Museum Collections** have also seen increased use this year, whilst the staff have continued with key enhancement projects. All the monographs in the Fellows Room, Main Library, and Inner Library, have now been barcoded, and this work in continuing through the rest of the collection. Further cataloguing of our archives has been greatly accelerated thanks to the help of Oxford student interns and a growing team of volunteers. With the support of donations from Fellows, we have made a start in cataloguing our collection of around 3,000 printing blocks, revealing some fascinating material. Furthermore, the Kelmscott Manor collection is currently being catalogued and added to the Society’s Collections Management System.

In collaboration Nottingham Trent University our Roll Chronicle and our Pedigree of the Kings of England underwent state-of-the-art scanning and digital images will be available on our website soon.

Of especial importance to Fellows who find it difficult to get to London, the Society joined SCONUL which facilitates access to other academic libraries and over 160 of our Fellows have taken advantage of this and have signed up to gain access to other participating libraries across the UK. A comprehensive survey of library users has also provided important insights to inform future planning. One immediate response to feedback provided by our Fellows will be the trialling of new evening and Saturday Library opening hours in 2023–24.

Work on **publications** has also seen a new development. Alongside *The Antiquaries Journal,* we have re-launched our oldest publication, *Archaeologia,* first published in 1779 in a new form as an occasional, wholly digital and open-access imprint. The first paper by Gabor Thomas *et al.* reassesses the archaeological evidence for the early medieval church of SS Mary and Ethelburga at Lyminge, Kent. We also published Research Report no. 83 *The History of King Richard the Third, by Sir George Buc, Master of the Revels,* edited with introduction and notes by the late Arthur Noel Kincaid. This discusses Sir George’s position in the literary and scholarly world of his day and traces the text’s transmission.

During the year as usual we hosted a variety of well attended **lectures, seminars and events** at Burlington House. I am very pleased to report that we we have seen a return of good numbers of in-person attendees at meetings, whilst on-line access has allowed us to continue to reach wider audiences by simultaneously streaming lectures and, at the same time, building up a library of Youtube recordings of lectures that continue to be viewed later. The latter represents an extremely valuable long-term legacy of the Covid years.

We hosted several seminars through the year. The first was *Caribbean Literature in English – Writing Back and Writing Forward*, which welcomed new audiences and presented ideas and perspectives from international speakers. This was followed by *The Future of Archaeology in England,* a seminar which debated points raised in the Society’s 2020 manifesto of the same name. Finally, in February, we hosted *Cultural Heritage as the Target and Victim of War: First-hand reports from Ukraine* in which colleagues from Ukraine provided important insights into the impact of the war. (We plan to return to the broad theme of the impact of conflict on the heritage in future meetings.) For their work in organising these various events I would like to offer our thanks to our Fellows Linda Grant, John Hines, Simon Kaner, Heather Sebire and Sadie Watson.

A unique social event was held on Halloween, *A Warning to the Curious: Two Ghost Stories* by M.R. James FSA, where performer Robert Lloyd Parry bought two of the eeriest and most entertaining of his tales back to life.

I am also delighted to report that thanks to the efforts of our staff, the Society has been successful in obtaining funding from the NHLF for a new project called *Sensing History.*  This 26-month project will see the Society open its doors to schools and to the public (with a regular open Fridays) that will showcase the Society’s historic ground floor apartments, with displays of our royal portraiture. Last Monday, April 24th, saw the first school visit under this scheme.

**Burlington House Lease**

We have made progress in our discussions over the Burlington House lease, with the work led with renewed vigour by our General Secretary, Andrew Macdonald. It remains something of a roller-coaster, with the discussions interrupted by the political turmoil at Westminster, but we are now engaged in serious negotiations. In the early summer we held a meeting with the Secretary of State in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove MP), who said that he hoped we could find a solution and instructed civil servants to work with us on this. After subsequent changes of government, we met the new Minister responsible for the matter, Baroness Scott of Bybrook and senior Civil Servants in January, and are expecting a follow-up meeting very shortly. This progress has been made thanks to the our Parliamentary supporters (especially our Fellows Tim Loughton MP, Lord Cormack and Sir Chris Bryant MP) with able support from AprilSix (Vernon Hunte) in close collaboration with our colleagues in the other Courtyard Societies.

As announced recently, Andrew Macdonald will be standing down from his role as General Secretary from the end of this month, but he will continuing to lead our work on negotiations over the Burlington House lease. I am very pleased that he has agreed to continue to work with us to try to bring this process to a successful conclusion.

**Broader Context**

Turning now to the broader context within which we operate, I would like to reflect on some of the issues that emerged during our discussions whilst working on our new Strategic Plan. I preface this with two observations. First, our Society has now been in existence for 316 years. During its history it has been through various transformations as it has evolved to meet the needs of the day. In doing this, it has been successful in following the route that forms the motto of my Cambridge College (Fitzwilliam) – Ex antiquis et novissimis optima (the best of the old and of the new). I am a firm advocate of continuing in this adaptive tradition, but in order to do this we need periodically to stand back and to consider our context. This was the aim of our strategic review which focused on thinking about the role of Society of Antiquaries as a Learned Society in the 21st Century.

Second, we must be honest about the changing landscape within which we operate. Although, as I continue to emphasise, our Society is not an archaeological society but serves a much broader constituency, it has long played a significant role within the archaeological sector, the landscape of which has changed completely since I was elected a Fellow in the 1980s. The flourishing of the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists as a professional body as well as developing role of Heritage Alliance as an effective lobbying organization across the broader sector has eroded some of the territory once primarily occupied by this Society. As has recently been agreed by Council (in its consideration of the outcome of the seminar on *The Future of Archaeology in England*), we should embrace this reality. For lobbying, the Society should in general work within the Heritage Alliance. In defining our role within archaeology we wish to define a distinctive niche with focus on two objectives:

• Supporting and actively advocating for genuine enhanced public benefit through promoting increased in knowledge and understanding resulting from archaeological work, including critical appraisal of results, academic synthesis and, importantly, its communication to a broad public.

• Supporting, enabling and promoting collegial networks of regional collaboration which bring academics into partnership with curators, contractors and other interested parties to support knowledge exchange and to encourage critical understanding and synthesis.

Alongside this, the Society will also work with others in the sector to promote improvements in the quality of archaeological practice drawing on the wide range of knowledge and expertise of the Fellowship to support those working in the sector.

Similar principles extend to all other areas of our Societies interests which I see as encompassing *all* aspects of the material past – with a distinctive cross-disciplinary emphasis. Other academic bodies are now for-ever talking about how to promote interdisciplinarity, but Antiquarianism has been embracing it since the 17th century. We need to be *much* more assertive in explaining this to a broader public whilst actively practicing and celebrating it ourselves. Debate about the term ‘antiquary’ figured in large discussions over the strategy. I am pleased that we have decided to work to celebrate and explain this rather than seek an alternative term. I would urge you all to actively engage with our mission of promoting Antiquarianism as an interdisciplinary subject.

There was also discussion about the balance between ‘curating’ or preserving evidence of the past, re-interpreting and explaining it. All were agreed on the importance of valuing the material from the past (places and structures as well as objects), whilst also promoting new interpretations and debating ideas. Surrounded in this room by the late 18th–early 19th century legacy of Thomas Kerrich’s collecting, we should always remember the value of preserving things that may seem out of fashion at one time.

We engaged in thoughtful conversations about the relative merits of particular words in the drafting, and there was some debate over whether we refer to ourselves as Researchers or Scholars. This reminded me of how terms can evoke very different responses and understandings from different individuals. We have retained both these words as our aim is to be inclusive, but in debating these particular words, I felt in retrospect that we had not given sufficient emphasis to our support for the independence of research/scholarship. I mean this both in the sense of the Society being there to support Fellows who do not have the institutional backing that those of us based in universities enjoy, but also in promoting and sustaining work that may go against the grain of contemporary fashion.

Through all our discussion about strategy, there was a clear agreement that we should have a renewed focus on enhancing public benefit. In doing this, the Society should continue to develop its role as a forum for debating, explaining and promoting knowledge of the subject, communicating exciting new research and discoveries, and exploring ideas for three groups: Fellows, the Heritage Sector and the Wider Public. We are exceptionally well placed to do this, and we should use of position in striving to facilitate interchange and dialogue at all levels.

Following our debates, our vision is now expressed as follows:

*The Society of Antiquaries is a community of researchers and scholars curious about the past: its objects, images, places, texts and ideas, and what they can say to us today. For 300 years, we’ve worked across disciplinary borders. We record, conserve and interpret; but we also question, critique and push understanding forwards.*

*To do this, we nourish a lively and increasingly diverse fellowship of historians, archaeologists, curators and many other specialists. We stimulate the wider heritage sector, acting as a global independent forum. And we aim to excite the world, bringing the broadest possible public audience into our never-ending enquiry.*

*In a complex, contested and uncertain world, our enquiries remain as vital as ever: to understand how people live and think, through the places they live and things they create.*

I believe that this framework provides a strong foundation for us to work as a Society over the next few years. I hope you agree.