

## **THE CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR THE AGM IN 2021**

This report covers the period from the 2019 AGM, so takes in some of the events in lockdown, where the Trustees were still watching matters that could affect The Close. It wasn't easy!

### **GENERAL ISSUES IN LOCKDOWN**

#### **2019**

We looked at the Cathedral's cloister roof solar panels application, comparing it to a successful and well put together application by Gloucester Cathedral – a cathedral of similar antiquity. Salisbury Cathedral were thorough in their own application. We did not comment. It made sense for their finances, the environment and the panels were unobtrusive.

We looked at a substantial application by the Cathedral to carry out tree works. Just before lockdown, the Trustees had established some guidelines which they would apply to all tree work applications. Any tree work in a conservation area like The Close and its immediate surroundings has to be notified to the planning authority some weeks before starting the work, to enable comments and trees under tree preservation orders are subject to a stricter regime. We set parameters about when we would oppose tree applications or raise queries.

We put in a submission to the Salisbury Central Area Framework (CAF), as it identified certain key areas - "character areas" - of Salisbury, one of which was the Cathedral and The Close. There were aspects of the CAF that concerned us since it addressed the potential for "re-purposing" historic buildings. Clearly, this could affect The Close with its wealth of these.

The Society, with the Close Residents' Association, were aware that the Cathedral were interested in progressing their eco church improvements to win a gold award. This would involve a number of strands involving the buildings and the land in The Close, one being the installation of the solar panels, and some potential projects which could enhance The Close. The eco church materials recommended that, as regards The Close green space, an audit of the plants, trees and fauna already there was the best way to start. The two organisations involved experts, volunteers and advisers and produced a report on the ecology of The Close in November. Many thanks to those of our members who gave freely of their time.

#### **2020**

By far the most complex application, with a lot of reports to sift through, was for the major works to be carried out at Salisbury Museum. Phase one of this, a few years back, was to create the very successful Wessex Gallery. This second application was for wide-reaching changes to the rest of the Museum. Again, we contemplated putting in a submission on one area of uncertainty in the application, but the point was picked up by Historic England, who had to be consulted on this application, given the Grade 1 listed status of the Museum. We felt that their voice would be even more powerful than our own. We hope that this will be borne out when the Museum starts the work, as in one area the extent of important original fabric that had been hidden by subsequent modern changes and might be affected by the

new works was uncertain. This will be carefully monitored as a result of their intervention before any works that might affect original fabric of the building.

We put in a submission against the owner seeking change of use of a small but very interesting fishing lodge/summer house in the grounds of Sarum St. Michael in The Close, right by the river Avon. We are quite surprised that this little building is not already listed, as it is quite a rare building (since such buildings tend not to survive) from maybe the mid/late eighteenth century. Because it was not listed it was an application for a change of use without the need of planning permission, just the planning authority's consent provided the property met certain criteria. The Society did not feel the case was made out for it being in the relevant category for a permitted change of use. As damning, as far as the Society was concerned, was that the property has flooded in the past, being so close to the river. This would have been a bad precedent for The Close.

We also submitted that it was in the "curtilage" of a listed building (The King's House, the Salisbury Museum) with which the fishing lodge had clear historic links and common ultimate ownership which means that this should have been a full planning application. The planning authority rejected the change of use. The planners didn't mention the "curtilage" argument in its decision which would have been useful for the Society. There must be a strong argument that all the unlisted buildings in The Close are in the curtilage of a listed building, including the curtilage of the Cathedral itself and The Close Wall.

The CAF still had areas of concern to the Society so we put in further submissions.

As regards collecting information on The Close ecology, some surveys were carried out, but the lockdowns rather stopped that.

On a sad note, the Society lost one of its longest standing Trustees, Professor Ron Johnston O.B.E., at the end of May in 2020, unexpectedly. The Trustees really miss his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Close, his wicked sense of humour and his written and editorial skills. There is a tribute to him, and a link to his obituary on our website.

## **2021**

We put in a submission regarding No. 73 The Close, an attractive small house which abuts the Harnham Gate, on the right-hand side looking from inside the Gate.

The lease had expired and the property needed work to bring it up to standard for re-letting. In particular, the hallway and other ground floor areas had some serious damp problems but, the solutions could have potentially involved a replacement of some historic panelling, rather than an attempt to sort out any damp damage and carefully put back the original panelling. Historic England also followed the same line on this. The planning approval contained a detailed condition for the protection of the original panelling.

Most importantly, we put in an opposition to a possible proposal for changes to the Exeter Street roundabout, which could have moved a road much closer to The (grade 1 listed) Close Wall (with the damage from vibrations and air-borne pollutants it can cause) and

remove a pocket of green space and some trees in the City, in an area where they are in short supply. This was in response to a public consultation, rather than a planning application. We are delighted that this proposal is not now going ahead and thank members who put in oppositions to it. The Trustees look at any consultations in Salisbury which could affect our area of interest.

Our next task will be following the drafts of Salisbury Neighbourhood Development Plan as they are published. This, when finally adopted through a public consultation process, will become a planning document that the planning authority must consider in their decisions. So, we have to make sure it is cast in a way that does not have an adverse impact on heritage buildings in Salisbury as this could have repercussions for The Close area.

We also repeated certain of the surveys we started in 2019 to see how the eco church improvements to the green space might be progressed.

In 2021, the Society contributed to the cost of the new traffic kiosk in The Close. This was probably the largest contribution we have made to projects in The Close, (£3,000), but, at the time, there was a real prospect that the kiosk was not going to go ahead because of the Cathedral's financial losses due to the lockdowns. The Trustees had already decided that we would like to do something in 2020 to celebrate the Cathedral's 800th anniversary but, at the time, there was no obvious project which could enhance The Close. The revised kiosk design was much simpler and more attractive than the original design, which was rather over the top – the Conservation Officer had described that design as "verging on giving the impression of a heritage 'theme-park'"! Various contributions by members, residents and the Society meant that the new kiosk has been installed. I hope members will agree it is a welcome addition to The Close.

## LOOKING FORWARD

### The Constitution updates

The Trustees want to update the Society's Constitution. We have re-ordered our Objects clause to put our object to enhance and preserve The Close **first**, and our educational object second. The latter is important to us, as evidenced by our booklet about the Houses in The Close, but the former is our absolute priority. We have broadened it slightly to make it clear we are protecting the history and heritage of The Close but also its natural environment and its "setting". With all the adverse events that have happened to the City in recent years, there will no doubt be considerable pressure to make the attractions in The Close busier, with all that could entail for the unique nature of The Close.

We want to make some administrative changes (we feel we need to for certain matters) as the old Constitution only contemplates meetings **in person** and voting **by hand** in person. All Trustees' meetings currently should be **in person**. Our Secretary should, in theory, post notices and communications **to the last known address of the Member**, so it is time it is made clear that email is acceptable! We have put in changes to ensure that if we get another horrific event like a lockdown, we can keep going as close as possible to business as usual using technology. We hope increased use of technologies may enhance the services

we can provide for Members. We are offering a zoom option to the AGM this year as an alternative for those who do not wish to, or are not able to, attend the AGM in person.

The Charity Commission advises small charities to consider if their constitutions need updating and to look at the standard constitutions produced by the Charity Commission, which are available to charities online. We have done this and added some general clauses.

We have included the power for the Trustees to set the rates for subscriptions and to change or add to the categories of membership. This otherwise would require a vote at the AGM for any change. Our research shows that it is common for charities such as ours or the Civic Society, to give the flexibility to the Trustees to adjust subscriptions. As Trustees, we have a duty to act in the best interest of the Society, so we do hope the members will trust us to make the right decisions on this, going forward. The rates have remained unchanged for thirty years, so it may be that they will need to increase at some stage.

### **The Society's Website/Members' Facilities**

The Trustees are looking at upgrading our existing website or creating a new website on a new platform which also should enable us to deliver improved functionality and some Member-orientated facilities. The Trustees will be looking into things such as videoing talks or the annual lecture, and maybe online talks /materials for members only. Another possibility might be to show some unusual features of the Houses in The Close, in locations that the public would not see. Many properties may show a Georgian facade but the walls at the back of the house or some of its windows or internal features, say, show evidence of its much older origins.

It is early days, but the Trustees will be actively working on this project in the coming months.

We will be looking at an online newsletter for members. This was something that was tried in the past, but news is never regular, so we would look to provide newsletters as and when there is relevant news to report. If there are important developments that Members need to know about and might want to comment on personally to the appropriate authority, we will continue to circulate messages on them ad hoc as we do at present.

### **Empty Properties in The Close**

Another area that, I know, is of concern to Members and, indeed, many non-members, is the length of time that three properties in The Close, Numbers 17 and 20 (both Grade 2\*) and, most importantly, Leadenhall (Grade 1), have been standing empty. Those of us who had a "jab" at Leadenhall will know how very sad the building is looking.

We have been keeping a dialogue going with the Dean & Chapter asking them to tell us what their plans are for these properties. Lockdown has not helped but all we can confirm is that we are told they do intend to proceed with using Leadenhall as the new Cathedral HQ, bringing all the staff together under one roof. This would mean the current Chapter Office and their offices in Wyndham House would ultimately be vacated. This whole process will need to be watched very carefully, particularly anything affecting Leadenhall. The Society

expects that, if there is any progress in getting these buildings occupied, that there will be some pretty extensive planning applications to work through. And, if the Chapter Office is vacated, this building itself is Grade2\*, and it will inevitably need extensive changes for whatever new use is planned, so any planning applications will have to be reviewed very thoroughly. We will keep members posted of any developments on this front.

The Society has already volunteered to be a sounding board as regards the plans for Leadenhall and were thanked for that, but we were told it was still early days.

I have had a very recent dialogue with the Chapter Clerk about Leadenhall becoming the Cathedral HQ. It is a very complicated application and the Cathedral say the full planning application will be in the first half of next year. They do not wish to set a more precise timeframe on it because it is a huge project for the Cathedral. It is disappointing because it will be empty for a further winter but the Chapter Clerk tells me they do carry out regular inspections of all three properties and they are mandated to do this by their insurance policy.

I can also say that they had thought they had a solution for 20 and 20A The Close – the empty property next to Sarum College - but, unfortunately, a few weeks ago the arrangement fell through.

It is also apposite to say that the Cathedral has been put on the back foot as regards these three properties, given the intervention of a pandemic. I am told that the Cathedral is working towards a solution for all three properties by some time in 2022.

### **Meeting the Dean**

At the last AGM, I reported that I had had a meeting with the (then) new Dean, accompanied by Julian Hepplewhite as Chair of the Residents' Association to introduce ourselves. The intention was to repeat that meeting, say, every six months or a year, but Covid stopped that. We have now set up a meeting with him in December so if anything emerges that is relevant to the Society and which is not confidential, it will be shared with Members.

### **Legacy**

This will not appear in the Treasurer's Report, as he will be reporting on the last two financial years. But I am delighted that the Society received an unexpected legacy from a Jean Mary Reynolds. We have tried to research who she is and what her connection is with the Society. If any Member has any information about her, we would love to know as we would like to put some sort of tribute on our website.

