

Report of the Chairman

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen

I indicated in my report last year that a key project for the coming year would be the Historic Spine, and events have certainly borne that out. We have built on the earlier work of Peter Burgess and his Group, which of course includes Bob Bearman whose idea this is, and on the 16th July, with the Town Management Partnership, we held a meeting at this hotel (The Falcon) to discuss the Historic Spine and the Walkable Core. Thanks to the efforts of Ian Heggie and the Communications Group, over 100 people turned out at what was a most successful meeting.

By Stratford standards a strange thing happened at that meeting - there was an outbreak of consensus and it was clear there was very strong support for both the Walkable Core and the Historic Spine. In order to maintain this momentum, as a Society, we agreed to form an Action Group to seek and promote the implementation of the Historic Spine. This Group, under the chairmanship of Kevin Bond, our current vice-chairman, has already started its task. Its membership includes representatives from the three local authorities, the Birthplace Trust, the Theatre. The Town Trust and other key players – and all of these organisations readily agreed to support the Group.

As we have discussed on earlier occasions, many of the proposals for the Spine are easy to implement and relatively inexpensive. We hope the Action Group at its next meeting will adopt a few of these proposals e.g. removal of clutter and drunken signs, introduction of restrictions on loading and un-loading and the adoption of the Spine scheme as supplementary Planning Guidance. Those proposals will then be taken forward with discussions with the local councillors and we shall look to the councillors, not only for support for the scheme, but also for their support for their implementation. So far we have been long on the talk, and short on the action, and I know that Kevin Bond will be seeking to remedy that.

In October last year the Society organised a workshop at the Shakespeare Centre for Housing Design. Peter Burgess, who arranged the event, had invited representatives from a cross-section of organisations and over 80 people attended. The speakers were excellent and the event well-received. The Society now looks to build on this event and to work for better

design standards for development in Stratford, particularly in housing. We take the view that, whether we like it or not, there will be extensive housing development in the town in the years to come. Accepting that position, we are resolved to secure an improvement in the standards of design, and many of you will have heard the excellent talk on the 15th February by Leonora Rozee on this subject. For those of you who could not make this meeting, there is an excellent report on the talk on our website www.stratfordsociety.co.uk.

I am sure that the promotion of good design practice will feature strongly in the coming year. I think the Society, however, needs to develop its own thoughts on good design – it is easy to criticise any development as being of poor design – we must be prepared to set more clearly what standards we recommend and accept. As Leonora Rozee mentioned recently good design is not necessarily subjective as there are certain fundamental principles of good design which are objective. It is for the Society now to set out its views and, this is in hand.

Following the Design Workshop, we set up informal discussions with the Planning Authority, the SDC, and they were represented by Councillor George Atkinson, Port folio holder for Planning, the Strategic Director and the Chief Planner. They have indicated that they would like to meet us informally on a regular basis, of say 3 or 4 meetings per year. We met on the 15th February to establish the ground rules for the meetings and agreed that we shall be represented by Kevin Bond, Leon Tanner and Brian Wright. We now look forward to those meetings progressing.

I mention this development because I think it is a glimmer on the horizon for us. In the past few years we have not enjoyed a satisfactory dialogue with the Planning Authority, but this does now present us with an opportunity to discuss our thoughts on good design and many other planning issues. Fingers crossed!!

We have enjoyed another season of excellent Talks here at the Falcon and the attendances and support have been very good. I have already mentioned the recent Talk by Leonora Rozee, and please do not forget the Talk on the 19th April on Heritage-led Regeneration.

At this stage, I would like to thank the Falcon Hotel for providing such excellent facilities for our meetings – I am sure that the comfortable surroundings have improved attendances. Our thanks also to the Swans Nest Hotel for the accommodation provided for our committee meetings.

The social events again have been well supported. We enjoyed a memorable evening at the Birthplace in July and members saw the new exhibitions followed by supper in the Centre. I am particularly delighted that Diana Owen will be joining us later to bring us up to date on their plans for the coming year. Our Christmas event at Nash's House in December was a great success – a tale of ghosts and witches by John Hogg in one of our favourite venues.

A highlight for me during the year (perhaps during my chairmanship) was undoubtedly the visit of the TV Presenter/Historian Michael Wood. Michael came during the Birthday Celebrations in April and he gave a walking lecture along the Historic Spine from the Birthplace to Holy Trinity – he was followed by a band of 50-60 members and visitors, most of whom were woman! His enthusiasm was infectious and his knowledge and love of the town was evident for all to see. I can report to the Society that is now not only Japanese tourists who walk down the middle of the street admiring our buildings – they have been joined by Michael Wood.

In February, some 20 of our members joined other members of the public on a trip around the new theatre. We now look forward to the opening of the building later in November, and can be well satisfied with the role the Society has played in the consultation process over many years. For my part I like the Tower and the Canopy – but I reserve judgement on the brickwork retained on two of the flanks.

During the year we have co-opted new faces to the committee - Wendy Temple, whose appointment as secretary is recommended later in this meeting – and Jean Clymer who is being put forward as our new Programmes Secretary. Both are welcome and will, I know greatly strengthen the Society. We have also appointed Dick Prior, as the man with the camera, and he has already done some excellent photography for us. Thank you Dick.

As I now come to the end of my term of office I returned to a survey I carried out when I first become Chairman to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Society and what we should be doing. I consulted the committee in this exercise.

1. The first point was that the Society should focus more on its role as a civic society. I hope that our work on the Historic Spine has helped us to do that, and the further work yet to be done on promoting good standards of design on new development.

2. Secondly, there was general agreement that we needed to improve the way we promote and sell ourselves. Better communications was a key point.

I am delighted that, thanks to the efforts of our web master Ian Fradgley we now have established a web-site that is second to none. This was a great step forward. Ian has received great support from another Ian – the indefatigable Ian Heggie. When is that man going to slow down? (I don't know what pills he is on, but I could do with some of them).

Our Talk of the Town has now been reviewed and we also have a new shorter newssheet called Update which has gone down very well. I pay tribute to the work over 10 years of Patricia McFarland as editor of the TOTT and we also thank Chris Towner for his considerable support. Brian Wright has taken on responsibility for the ToTT and I hope members like the new format.

So, all in all, I hope there have been major steps forward towards better communication and we have a new Communications Group to take some of these matters forward.

3. The final point from the survey was that we need to widen our membership base throughout the town and also we should become a more welcoming Society. I think we have succeeded in widening the membership base but we have received comments from some members recently that their welcome could be improved. So I ask members to make a point of engaging new faces – we hope the glass of wine helps – and I know our new Secretary has some thoughts about producing a welcome pack for new members.

On this last point there is clearly work still to be done

In conclusion may I give my thanks to all of the officers and members of the committee for all their support over my 4 years with a special mention to Beryl, our Secretary, who will be standing down as secretary as we had announced this last year. But perhaps most important of all, my thanks to you the members of the Society – thank you very much for putting up with me.

Ian Prosser
Chairman