

Chairman's Report



The year of 2021 saw the Stratford Society adopt a pattern of regular meetings, with 12 monthly member events and no summer break. Because of the ongoing covid pandemic and lockdowns imposed by Government, however, all of the meetings were virtual, conducted online by the Zoom facility. Participants eventually became accustomed to these, but they always seemed more like business seminars than gatherings of members of a society with shared interests. There is no substitute for physically meeting together in a room with a friendly atmosphere!

We did manage to meet outdoors for three memorable events. The first was a Spine Walk, led by Dr Robert Bearman, from the top of Bridge Street along High Street, Chapel Street, Church Street, Old Town and thence to Holy Trinity Church. Such was the demand that two groups were organised, one in each direction. The second event was at the invitation of the Friends of Shakespeare's Church, where we had the rare privilege of being able to climb up the scaffolding to the top of the north transept to inspect the restoration of the masonry. The third event was the Garden Party, held in September, where we were the guests of Tony and Janet Bird in the lovely gardens of their home in Billesley.

The Committee met six times by zoom during the year, at two-monthly intervals. There is a great deal of talent, experience and commitment among committee members, and we are fortunate to have such a strong group to lead the Society. My sincere thanks to all of them for their hard work and many contributions throughout the year. Thanks in particular to Dr Diana Owen, as she steps down from the Committee, for leading our work relating to the environment, which has opened up new avenues.

As we are now nearly halfway through 2022, there are encouraging signs. We are meeting together in person again, and there are three activities in which the Society is taking the lead:

- Consultation by Warwickshire County Council for the reconfiguration of High Street and Bridge Street, based on extensive discussions in the Town Strategic Partnership, in which our Deputy Chairman, John Scampion, has played a major role.
- Progression of plans for the installation of six new pavement plaques in front of key buildings along the Historic Spine.
- Grant from Historic England for an important historical research project to investigate the rebuilding of timber-framed houses in High Street and Chapel Street following three disastrous town fires in 1594, 1595 and 1614. This project was masterminded by Dr Robert Bearman.

The tension continues between the needs of preservation of the historic town centre and contemporary pressures for development. An example is the site of the former Debenhams store in High Street, to be turned into a large hotel. But instead of re-using the existing building, which has significant heritage value, the District Council has approved a plan for its demolition and a new building to be constructed. This is needlessly destructive, being both environmentally damaging and against the guidance of the Neighbourhood Development Plan. Another example is the site on the corner of Greenhill and Arden Streets, which should be cherished as a low-rise space, welcoming pedestrians coming from the station. Yet the owner is pressing for a monstrous high-rise development that would loom over the surroundings. The Society is fearless in expressing its opposition to such developments through the representations of Margaret Cund, our Planning Officer.

The main concern at present is that our membership continues to decline, and the number of new members joining during the year was outweighed by the number who resigned or deceased. Fewer than 100 members are contactable by email. Of these, fewer than half respond to requests or participate in meetings. Somehow we need to reach out to younger generations of residents to get them involved. The issues of planning, tourism, traffic, roads, house building, conservation, the river and the environment remain as important as ever to well-being and quality of life in Stratford. I encourage everyone who can suggest relevant topics for meetings, excursions or campaigns to get involved.

Lindsay MacDonald