

THE PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT

At my Presidential inaugural address back in October, I noted that, whilst I chose as my main theme, a topic that looked into the future, namely the transformation of Humanities research by digital and other computational opportunities, there was also a role for the Lit and Phil that had changed only minimally. Back in 1835, the need for there to be disinterested discussion and a permanent site for such meetings was clear and a forum wherein tolerance might be fostered and an interchange of ideas encouraged grew out of this realisation – so here we are at the City's museum. I know that it's not only my own perspective that this last year's lectures have been provoking and timely, ranging from the long view given us by Sir Michael Marmot in October on how social inequality as far as health care was concerned should be near the top of our present political agenda, to the future mapped out for us in November by Dr Tristram Hunt on how the V and A aimed to preserve its mission but also to develop it away from a strictly metropolitan basis to an analysis of what we might really expect from public institutions such as the BBC in February, led by Prof Jean Seaton in a lecture sponsored by Leicester Mercury.

In a time of persistent self-reflection, it was inevitable that these discussions had sub-texts that pointed to contemporary preoccupations. But the beauty of such a varied series of events stemmed not only from topics that seemed directly relevant to one or other of our main interests, but those that surprised us with just as urgent prompts that initially might have seemed peripheral. In Prof Andrew Pollard's magisterial history in January of how typhoid fever was combatted in the Victorian era (and Leicester being one of the worst affected areas), our complacency seemed misplaced when we considered how that mastery over such a disease was not a world-wide situation; indeed, the search for new vaccines to keep one step ahead of the worst infections was an urgent and persistent struggle. Thanks to the sponsorship of the Natural History Section, Prof Dave Goulson's warning in March that several species of bumblebees are threatened with extinction struck home, especially when one looked at wider climate change issues. By the way, we were also presented with a welcome conundrum when some 80 guests wished to attend, and the start of the lecture had to be delayed whilst extra seating was sought. But let's keep that between ourselves just in case. The Royal Society of Chemistry supported the visit of Dr June McCombie's insightful investigation of the Chemical Cosmos, a reminder of how simply establishing facts was aided by modelling one's investigations. We were introduced to a new discipline, that of astrochemistry, a projection of laboratory predictions onto the wider cosmos. Similar vastnesses were explored in January by Dr Phil Wilby, in a lecture supported by the Geology section, which skilfully introduced us to a close-up picture of how evolution might be mapped by observing how the first ecosystems might have formed and developed in their earliest manifestations.

The Society has always attracted discussion on what could be called the human factor and this year we were well served by several lectures: in November Jeremy Prescott showcased how the War Graves Commission promoted with extreme sensitivity the memory of the fallen in wars distant as well as recent in time. In two literary lectures, Prof Kelvin Everest in October and Dr Nick Freeman in March not only introduced us to the art of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Oscar Wilde respectively, but also reminded us that whilst we might be moved by the poetry, drama or prose we did not therefore have to admire the artist. Indeed, in both examples, we turned to the past to recognise aspects of the present, in definitions of the Romantic as well as Modern Comedy. Thanks to the close co-operation of the University of Leicester, In Prof Gordon Campbell's lecture commemorating the University's inception in October, we heard of how the institution had evolved from very humble beginnings 100 years ago and how it aims to withstand present-day pressures quite distinct from its founding ideas. It was also good to be reminded of how it was no sin to be local in one's aims. The Peach lecture in March was given by Sebastian Conran who gave an account of his own adventures in design, from Punk to Modern-day corporate branding, was not just fascinating in its autobiographical details, but also a reminder of how the human element in design was all-important.

The provision of an excellent programme of evening lectures for our membership and visitors is central to the Lit and Phil's long-standing ambition to bring the newest, cutting-edge, research in the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences to Leicester and Leicestershire. One of our future aims is to branch out into providing lunchtime lectures in league with the city's Georgian Group and the Museum. A talk will

take place in September to coincide with the loan of a portrait of Richard III to New Walk Museum from The National Portrait Gallery.

The continuing support of all three of the county's universities is welcome. We are exploring possible extension of that network so that the combined expertise might be available to the Museum and the Leicestershire public.

We demonstrated our support of the Museum by a donation of a sum of £1000 to the fund set up to purchase the Wollaston Hogarth which is presently on loan to the Museum. The signs are that the funding call has been successful.

The *Annual Transactions* of the Society ably edited by Geoffrey Lewis will have summaries of the 2018-19 Lectures and is published on line and in hard copy.

The Society's 2019's Schools' lecture on space travel was delivered by Prof Anu Ojha (the Director of the National Space Academy) on the 23rd. January at South Wigston High School when c.200 pupils from Lancaster Boys, Beauchamp College, Wigston Academy and South Wigston High School participated. Ann Fuchs, Peter Fuchs and I also attended and we can report on the keen response of the students to the lecture which was demonstrated in the question and answer session. Susan Webb, Head of the host School is keen to continue to engage with the Lit and Phil to stage similar events.

The Society awards prizes to undergraduate finalists in English from our three universities. Details of these are reported in the *Transactions* annually.

The annual programme of lectures would not be possible without the invaluable support of a variety of institutions and individuals and we are indebted to our sponsors. The Geology and Natural History Sections of the Society have their own distinctive programmes of events, and continue to give much-valued support. From the region lectures are sponsored by the Leicester Mercury, and our three universities: De Montfort, Leicester and Loughborough, and nationally, by the Royal Society of Chemistry and the British Science Association.

We continue to communicate effectively with our members and with the general public. I would like to thank our publicity officers Diana Thurston and Ann Fuchs for their efforts to ensure this happens, and

to thank John Fothergill our website editor. The large numbers attending the lectures are testimony to their success. I am pleased to announce that the Lit and Phil Council has established a sub-committee, chaired by Prof John Fothergill, to ensure that our website and social media platforms are dynamic.

I would like to thank all the members of the Council for their invaluable input and support over the last year. I have already mentioned the significant input of Ann, Diana and John and there are others. Hilary and Geoffrey Lewis our Honorary Programme Secretaries, continue, miraculously, to ensure every year an outstanding programme of speakers. It is with regret that we report that this will be the last year that such planning will be carried out by Hilary and Geoffrey; their contributions will be sorely missed. In future, Prof Alison Yarrington will convene a small group charged with the task of drawing up a timetable of distinguished speakers. Our Honorary Secretary John Heard has made a major contribution to the smooth running of the Society as has our Honorary Treasurer, Rob Purdy. The immediate past president Sir Kent Woods, has been helpful with his advice in a year that has been more turbulent than expected. Joan and David Beeson are our Membership Secretaries, and have proved once again meticulous in maintaining our records. Sociability continues to be a key element in our evening meetings and our thanks go to those members of the Society (principally Joan, Hilary, Ann) who have generously ensured that refreshments are available after the lectures so that attendees can interact with the speakers.

A major 'thank you' goes to our colleagues from the Museum and Art Gallery who are here to welcome, ensure that the events run smoothly by making sure that the lectures, and the questions and answer sessions are audible. Members should note that The Museum and Art Gallery will be celebrating its 170th anniversary with the anniversary of Leicester Museums Services, on Saturday 22nd. June 2020.

It has been a great honour and enormously enjoyable to be President of the Society.