

OXFORDSHIRE HISTORIC CHURCHES TRUST

Minutes of the Fourth Annual meeting of General Members of the Trust held by Zoom at 2.30 pm on Wednesday 30th September 2020.

The Chair explained the proposed format for a meeting held via Zoom, and, in welcoming some twenty-five general members, Council members and Trustees, stressed the Trust's pleasure that Bishop Colin as President had been able to take part in the meeting in the week before his retirement as Bishop of Dorchester. The Bishop opened the meeting with prayer and noted with regret that his farewell service in Dorchester Abbey had to be severely limited in number by the pandemic. In his introduction the Bishop noted that he had recently visited two of the churches to which the Trust had made grants, and the grants continued to act as 'sticky money' helping to persuade other trusts and individuals to follow suit. He continued to see ideas floated in 'Churches for Communities' come to fruition. There was great gratitude across the Diocese for the Trust's continuing work.

1. Apologies

1.1 Apologies were received from five general members of the Trust.

2. Minutes of the Annual Meeting of general members of the trust held on 28 July 2019.

2.1 The minutes were approved as a correct record with a minor correction to the time of ending. There were no matters arising not covered elsewhere in the agenda.

3. Chair's report

3.1 The Chair drew on the Annual Review to highlight a number of key areas of the Trust's work. Detailing the various sources of income, the Chair noted that a key feature of recurrent income was the money raised by Ride and Stride. The Vice-Chair would report later on how the current situation had been handled, but he particularly wanted the extra work that she had undertaken to be recognised. The Trustees had already expressed their gratitude to Hilary.

3.2 Under the heading of bequests, the Chair reported a significant gift from the estate of Stella Welford and on the progress made in receiving the outstandingly generous bequest from the estate of Dr David Booth. The latter bequest had already permitted the Trust to increase its caps on grant levels and to make more top level grants, two of which in each year would be labelled as '*OHCT David Booth Grants*'. Bequests are used as a capital buffer for the Trust's operations with the free income generated put toward grants.

3.3 In reporting on the governance changes, the Chair reiterated the Trust's thanks for the outstanding contributions made as trustees by Jonathan Scheele and Gillian Argyle. Both have now taken on roles on Council and this is greatly appreciated. Two new trustees - Nicola Coldstream, a distinguished expert in medieval architecture and Stephen Slack, recently retired as Chief Legal Adviser to the Archbishops' Council and General Synod - have been appointed, and they bring considerable expertise to the Trust's work. Without a change to the Constitution the Trustees would have lost three key office holders in the next 18 months; a change to the Constitution has now been made to avoid this by allowing a trustee to serve two consecutive terms before requiring a break point of one year. Succession planning is an important item for the Trust.

3.4 While it was possible to hold a number of the events planned to take place since the last annual meeting, all those scheduled after Spring 2020 have had to be postponed until 2021 because of the pandemic. Concerned about the hiatus in events, the Trustees looked for alternative means to promote awareness and understanding of the Trust's purposes. The Chair will write to members shortly with details of two relevant videos already made by Professor Airs and available via YouTube. David Warr has agreed to make some videos of church tours specifically for the Trust in 2021.

3.5 Members marked the deaths of Simon Haviland and Robin Cotton with a minute's silence. The first of these had been Membership Secretary and Woodstock Area Rep, a stalwart of Ride and Stride, and a moving force in the production of 'Churches for Communities'. Robin Cotton had been successively Chair and President, had introduced the bicycle ride to Oxfordshire which has become our Ride and Stride, and continued as an enthusiastic OHCT supporter to the end of his life.

3.6 In conclusion, the Chair expressed his thanks to all who made the work of the Trust possible, emphasising the key roles that the local knowledge, experience and contacts of the Area Reps played in the Trust's effective working. The President thanked Dr Goss for his considerable contribution as Chair.

4. Treasurer's Report

4.1 The Treasurer noted that the full details of the accounts could be found in the Annual Review, but, in outline, the Trust's income had continued to grow (by 10%), grants had risen by 31% to over £250,000, and a capital loss on investments from the pandemic signalled at the 31 March date had since largely been reversed. Transferring the capital from the David Booth bequest into the Heritage Fund had been a slow process, but the £2.8 million that would soon reach us would substantially increase investment income. On the other hand, the impact of the pandemic on the receipts from Ride and Stride and on investment income were difficult to forecast. With the Booth request, the Trustees envisaged increasing overall grant giving in 2021 to £318,000, while keeping expenses low and well-controlled.

4.2 In response to a question, various members filled in the background to Dr Booth's connection to both the Trust and to Oxfordshire.

4.3 In formally receiving the Annual Report and Accounts, members echoed the Treasurer's thanks to the members of the Finance Committee, noting both the extent of individual professional expertise and specific experience of investments for churches and local authorities. Charity Commission guidelines were observed and a careful eye kept on the diversification of investments. Cazenoves continued to provide additional advice.

5/6 Receive the Statutory Annual Report and Accounts

Members received the Annual Report and Accounts in the context of the reports from the Chair and the Treasurer (see 4.3 above).

7. Election of President for the forthcoming year

7.1 Having ascertained his willingness to hold office for a year, the general members elected Sir Hugo Brunner (proposed by the Chair and seconded by the Grants Officer) with acclamation.

8. The implications of Covid for our churches and the Trust

8.1 In introducing the topic, the Chair identified a number of specific issues set against the generally disastrous impact of the pandemic on the ongoing income of churches across Oxfordshire. He noted the irony of the fact that churches following the advice of the Taylor Report and maximising their income from the hire and use of refurbished facilities (whether in church buildings or church halls) had often been hardest hit by the collapse of such income streams.

8.2 At the same time and understandably in the national situation churches were being kept waiting for clarity on a number of further financial matters. These included: the delay on a government response (including possible funding) to the outcome of the Taylor Report pilot studies; uncertainty about the renewal of the VAT refund via the Places of Worship Scheme; and uncertainty about what will be required for churches to maintain their charitable status. (The current exemption for most Church of England churches from the need to register as individual charities is due to cease on April 1st 2021 – but see also para 8.10.)

8.3 While relevant bodies are actively lobbying on these issues, the many individuals who mastermind repairs and renewal for Oxfordshire's churches are continuing with their efforts despite the difficulties inflicted by the pandemic. Often elderly and not necessarily with finance or building experience, church wardens and others have dealt valiantly with repairs and renewal despite the difficulty of gaining safe access to church buildings which have largely been closed. Area Reps are clearly continuing to offer much valued assistance and the flow of grant applications testifies to the continuing commitment of all involved.

8.4 The Grants Officer commented on a slight reduction in the total number of applications over the year but emphasised the significant increase in the number of larger applications. At the last Council in February the overall sums needed by the seven projects making applications totalled

£2.25 million; five were seeking each to raise over £200,000 and two over £500,000 each. One other noticeable feature was a widespread attempt to undertake comprehensive repair projects even though access to church buildings for contractors was increasingly difficult.

8.5 In commenting on Ride and Stride and the pandemic, the Vice-Chair commented that the 2019 exercise which had produced an excellent profit of £112,000 now seemed a distant world away. We had hosted the now famous penny farthing bicycle launch, and all the usual elements of the 2019 event had gone well.

8.6 On the personnel front, Ride and Stride had said farewell to our administrator Jeanette Thomas with warm thanks and welcomed Beverley Bhaskar who was soon confronted with an entirely new set of circumstances in preparing for any sort of event in 2020 during the national lockdown.

8.7 Resolving in early summer to run a slimmed down event, the Vice-Chair confirmed that the administrative challenge had been substantial but assistance from Area Co-ordinators and others had made it possible. Contacting the vast majority of potentially participating churches had been a mammoth task including a significant mailing to all who had been involved at earlier stages with Ride and Stride - truly a major undertaking. With help from "O and B" it was possible for the OHCT website to show, for the first time, details of each church's provision for 12 September. Finally positive use had been made of social media, largely for the first time. Some good press coverage had been achieved, and there was evidence of increased numbers of participants visiting some churches, but it was not yet possible to estimate how well income had been maintained.

8.8 The Vice-Chair and her Area Co-ordinators had found the absolute centrality of effective communication and good publicity reinforced yet again, for both existing and a very welcome number of new participants. While rural churches were still often finding it difficult to re-open, if Ride and Stride could continue to attract new supporters and underline the value of the work of OHCT, then there appeared to be continued good will towards the support it offers.

8.9 The Charlbury children's Ride and Stride had gone from strength to strength, and Basil Eastwood will gladly share his experience of this with others who could be interested. Local partnership seemed to hold the key to success: for example, in Charlbury, proceeds were shared between OHCT and the various school PTAs involved. Local churches had accepted this departure from the usual arrangement (though they would normally have received a share of income, they still got good publicity and the chance of indirect financial benefit via the Trust).

8.10 In the ensuing discussion, the President asked Mr Slack to comment on the likelihood of PCCs having difficulty with charitable status. Mr Slack noted that there was no danger of the loss of charitable status in itself, but that individual registration of churches with the Charity Commission could well be required at some future point. Given the current pressure on Government and the Charity Commission, Mr Slack suggested that it was likely that the current exemption from such registration would be extended for a further year.

8.11 The President reported on the financial difficulties which were being reported on his parish visits. Weekly collection plates, annual fetes, wedding fees, had all suffered drastically from the lockdown. Parishes who had not adopted the Parish Giving scheme had been especially hard hit. All parishes were nervous about excessive calls on reserves.

8.12 Attention was drawn to the potential threat to the future of rural churches which the Trust - given its specific commitment in its Constitution to churches open for public worship - could not help to meet. Given the differing views about, for example, closing churches to focus on a larger central church or allowing churches in an area to open primarily for festivals, the members agreed that this was a live issue which the Trust should continue to monitor. Grade I and II* churches were protected inside and out so could not be treated as some other church buildings have been. Nonetheless, the potential danger to the fabric and condition of churches was very real.

8.13 The President reminded members that the climate emergency remained just as serious as before the pandemic. Church of England buildings were committed to zero carbon emission by 2030, and the Trust should prepare itself for grant applications which might increasingly relate to measures relating to this goal.

9. Close of meeting

9.1 The Chair prefaced his thanks to the President with a reminder that Christmas cards would soon be available for purchase online (as will be announced in a forthcoming email to Members). He asked his predecessor as Chair to propose a formal vote of thanks to Bishop Colin.

9.2 Basil noted that his links to the Bishop went back to an Archbishop's visit to Syria accompanied by Bishop Colin, as his then chaplain. He went on to highlight a range of very important initiatives between the Bishop and OHCT.

When Basil took the Chair in 2012, the Bishop was heavily involved in a project with Charles Baker and Simon Haviland to produce the book 'Churches for Communities' to be published in time for the Trust's 50th anniversary in 2014. Such a book, detailing the trials, tribulations and triumphs of churches in undertaking major alterations to improve their usefulness their communities, had been the Bishop's concept, and he had raised a good deal of the funding necessary. OHCT gained widespread kudos from this worthwhile exercise.

The Bishop became a key supporter of the Trust's Jubilee Campaign which established the endowment Heritage Fund which is now standing the trust in such good stead. He had been an enthusiastic supporter for Ride and Stride, in particular, presiding at a celebration for participants in Dorchester Abbey in the presence of their Royal Highnesses the Earl and Countess of Wessex, which occasion had featured a large, bicycle-shaped birthday cake, and he had regularly participated in Ride and Stride by riding with Basil and others in what became known as the 'Biking with the Bishop'.

Since 2016, Bishop Colin had enthusiastically been elected annually as President, and he had continued to be available (as the current Chair testified) with speedy advice, kindness and encouragement.

9.3 The motion of heartfelt thanks to the Bishop for his massive contribution to OHCT over the last twenty years was passed with acclamation from all members. The Bishop reiterated his own thanks to the officers and members of OHCT and ended the meeting at 4.30pm with prayer and the Blessing.