

Annual General meeting of the Hertford Society – 13 November 2021

Chairman's Report

President, ladies and gentlemen

What a pleasure it is to be back in our college, able to have our Annual General Meeting and Society lunch, after what has seemed like an eternity of staring at screens and telling members to turn their microphones on. Our last face-to-face AGM and black-tie dinner were actually over two years ago.

In giving my Chairman's Report, I am somewhat hindered by the fact that the Society has not been able to hold any events during the last year. However, the Committee belatedly held its annual dinner at the Oxford & Cambridge Club at the beginning of August. This was attended by past and present officers and members of the Committee; and also guests in the form of Frances Wheare, the ever helpful Director of Development at the college, and Caleb Bram, the current President of the JCR. What seemed incredible to those of us attending was that it happened at all, face to face.

The undergraduates and graduate students at the college have obviously had to cope with far more severe difficulties than the Committee of the Society, but there was an undeniable sense of relief among us that we had made a small step towards normality.

Our next Committee meeting, at the beginning of March this year, again via Zoom, began by remembering two former Chairmen, both of whom had recently died. Derek Conran (who first came up in in 1944 for an Army Officers' Short Course and returned in 1948 to read Modern History) had been a member of the SCR and very well-known in college for many years. It has been said of Derek, whose memorial service is being held in the college chapel this afternoon, that no other member had done as much, in so many capacities, to foster the continuing connection between Hertford and its old members.

And Judge Charles Gibson, who matriculated in 1959 and read Greats, had served on the Committee for some 32 years and was elected a Vice-President. He was a very familiar figure at Society events which he enlivened with his wonderfully dry wit.

On a happier note, it was agreed that two recent Hertford graduates join the committee: Kaja Fenn, recent member of the MCR committee and former President of the Boat Club; and Mitchell Tate, President of the JCR in 2018-2019. Both have expressed their enthusiasm for making the Hertford Society better known among younger alumni.

To order to encourage membership of the Society by current JCR and MCR members and those in their first year after going down from college, we are proposing that the Committee have discretion to charge them a reduced subscription.

The President of the MCR, Teresa Taylor, has also expressed an interest in providing students who were at Hertford for only the last academic year with a means of maintaining a connection with the college and that membership of the Society might help in this respect.

It must have been extremely disappointing to have taken a one-year course at Oxford during a year when it was near impossible to experience and enjoy all that Hertford and the University had to offer. The Committee is exploring ways of promoting membership of the Society among such students, including the holding of a party in college for current MCR members and those who have just gone down.

The Society has of course always had two main aims: to bring old members together in Oxford and elsewhere; and to make donations and gifts to the college for a range of significant small-scale projects.

But, for many of us, the Society also provides a forum where alumni and former staff can share their memories and knowledge of Hertford and contribute to the college's awareness and appreciation of its long and rich history. At our Zoom committee meeting last November, for instance, we discussed the condition of the memorial next to the Chapel entrance for those college members who had died in World War II and explored with the College the possibility of providing funding to restore the lettering that has faded. The Chapel Committee is supportive of the idea and we plan to proceed with this project.

The Society is today saying goodbye to our President Jacqui Smith who is coming to the end of her six-year term. This is sad for all of us in the Society to which she gave such service but we are not really saying goodbye since, as a past President, she will of course be welcome at all of our events, including the annual committee dinner. We are extremely pleased that Lord Pannick QC, a Hertford graduate and Honorary Fellow of the college, has agreed to offer himself as the next President. Let me add that he has kindly agreed to let us hold an event at the House of Lords next year. We are also very pleased indeed that two former Principals, John Landers and Will Hutton, have agreed to stand for election as Vice-Presidents of the Society.

Let me end with Evelyn Waugh, the great novelist who attended Hertford, who, when asked while at Oxford what he did for his college, said: "I drink for it." I suggest that we earnestly follow his example after our meeting.