

The Gower Society

Charity Registration Number 258372 (CIO Number 1172919)

Chairman's Report for AGM Saturday 5th May 2018

I will first give a resume of the work of the sub committees as overseen by the main committee and followed by the developments concerning the proposed change as a charity of an association of members to incorporation and the impact of the substantial inheritance from the late Mrs Patricia Lillian Gorvin who died on the 23rd August 2016.

Main Committee

Excluding the officers, the number of ordinary members of the main committee can be 15. We had 4 vacancies carried over from last year and now will have 6. This is in spite of the notice sent out with the notice of this meeting giving details of three vacancies, namely Ordinary Committee Members, Assistant Secretary and Website Manager. Therefore, the management of the Society has been conducted by the 5 officers and 12 committee members including one co-opted. One member resigned in February. It is now down to 9 members out of a maximum of 15.

Notwithstanding the number, the management of the Society has proceeded very successfully, largely due to the work of the sub committees and co opted members. The role of co opted members is valuable as they have a particular interest or expertise in the work of their sub committee, and share the responsibilities with main committee members.

At this point, I would like to make particular mention of two officers. Audrey Frank, who was appointed in 2015, is a trojan. Apart from her normal secretarial work, Audrey has had to get to grips with the complicated work involved in the proposed incorporation and the Gorvin legacy whilst at the same time shouldering the responsibility for the rota of officers at the coast watch station at Worm's Head. She has put her house on the market and will move away as soon as it is sold. No one is irreplaceable, but it will be difficult to find a successor, particularly one so willing, respected and well liked. Pending her departure, we seek an assistant both to help her and to learn the ropes.

The other officer I must mention is our treasurer, Steve Williams, who took office a year ago, succeeding Jeannette McClellan, both chartered accountants in private practice. He has settled into the role quickly and gives good practical advice. I am very glad to have him on board as well.

I must thank Jane Probert and Charles Hill for their valued work and support although, fortunately, they will remain doing non main committee work.

Sub Committees

Membership

We have 898 members which includes family members and so we have approximately 1,000 individual members. This is an increase of 15 on last year. We gained 59 new members of which 27 signed up at the Gower Show.

I commend and thank the unflappable Hildegard Roberts. I was heartened by committee members, Janet Hellewell and Maggie Cuthbert, volunteering to help Hildegard in uploading subscriptions as direct debit receipts all arrive together in January and generate some 190 bank statements.

We would like those receipts to be captured with our computer software being linked to the Bank's internet service, but the bank say that between them only the first 150 receipts can be collected. It means changing either the software or the bank or both. This can best be investigated when our website is revised or replaced and when we have a successor to our website manager, Alan Bailey, who wants now to retire after three years of conscientious and challenging work, although to his credit, he will not retire until we find a successor. That is another vacancy.

Publications

This committee of six comprises mainly co opted members and chaired by Rod Cooper. First and foremost, through the continuing valued work of Malcolm Ridge and Ruth Ridge, the editors, the annual Journal is published. The last volume, number 68, ran to 92 pages. Incidentally, the approximate cost per member of its printing and postage is about £5.00 which, together with the twice yearly newsletter and the programme gives rise to a total cost of very approximately £7 per member. Thus, the subscription which has remained fixed for several years, is very good value. Indeed, the newsletter itself is very good value and is commended by members not only for its coloured pictures, but content, all thanks to Audrey Frank its editor.

I must also thank Roy Probert, husband of retiring committee member Jane, for coordinating the programme. Fortunately, Jane will continue arranging talks and Roy will continue with the programme.

There are two other publications in the pipeline. A Guide to Gower pocket sized book, the sixth edition published in 1999 is under review with a view to revision. It will include information about the northern reaches of the Lordship, an area often undeservedly overlooked. There will be a monograph on the life of the late Ernest Morgan, who was the first chairman of The Gower Society, and the Swansea Borough architect. He died in 1954. It will include the architectural heritage of Swansea and will be particularly interesting.

Special Projects

Conscientiously chaired by Guto ap Gwent, the committee has been busy this year with three important projects. The bells of Cheriton and Llanmadoc churches have been restored with a grant from the Society of £20,000 and worthy of a blessing in February by the Archbishop of Wales, who mentioned The Gower Society. The project to restore, not merely maintain, various sections of the Gower Way proceeded with the completion recently of the first part.

The project will be worth every penny of the anticipated substantial total grant. It is an attraction not only to local people, but also walkers from far and wide who learn of its instigation by The Gower Society from the Society's leaflets and the 57 marker stones. The restoration is an acknowledgement to the good work of previous committees under the chairmanship of Malcolm Ridge. I thank Bob Denley, our former Footpath's Officer not only for his work in that capacity but for instigating this project.

Finally, there is Mewslade wall. The photographs on display this evening speak for themselves. It is seen by walkers, both down and across the valley on the Wales coastal path. The work by two stonemasons on their own separate sections is simply outstanding. No matter the weather, you will find these two solitary figures at work. They are very different characters and their styles differ too. The Society will have contributed £15,000 towards their wages and every penny will be well spent. There are Society plaques on the wall so the public will know the Society not only spends its time on searching planning applications.

I anticipate increased pressure from the City and County of Swansea for funding on heritage projects due to their lottery fund of £1.3 million pounds for the last three years now ending.

Rural Communities

Under the calm chairmanship of Jerry Kingham, it awarded 13 grants totalling over £19,000 which compares with eighteen grants totalling some £22,000 thousand pounds in 2016. Perhaps the most satisfying grant was the payment of £7,000 to an association of volunteers undertaking the restoration of a lock on the canal at The Mond, Clydach. The Society was glad for the opportunity of extending its work outside the peninsula for a worthwhile project associated with the industrial heritage of Swansea and in the urban area of the City. At the lower end of the scale, a modest grant was given to South Gower Sports Club in Scurlage towards the building of entrance gateway walls. The Society was glad to be associated with the younger members of the community and their wellbeing.

Youth

Chaired by Catherine Jones and assisted by Joan Darbyshire, the secretary, this group has continued with its good work giving opportunity to young people to learn about Gower and the outdoors. In 2017, led professionally by Dawn Thomas, 63 school field days were undertaken with the Society contributing £50 per trip. It also undertook nine activity days including overnight camping for the children of both members and non members. It awarded 10 grants totalling £5,370 to schools for projects including a pond, gardens and planters. Very recently, there was a moving ceremony of planting trees in Ilston Quarry in memory of the late Peter Hutchison, Betty Lowe, John Williams and Sheena Bishop. They were all workers for the group. It was triggered by dilapidation of a bench at the quarry in memory of Sheena, who sadly died in her 40s leaving two very young children.

Planning

This committee is chaired by the irrepressible Gordon Howe. It inspects all planning applications to the City and County of Swansea. Last year, they totalled approximately 2,700

of which 245 were scrutinised. The work is undertaken by the sub committee members on a three weekly rota. They now include our President's wife, Gill. They report to Gordon and he drafts the letters based on their report for their approval. There is often a divergence of opinion, but that is inevitable and healthy. They commented on 61 applications and objected only to 27. Again, I emphasise for the benefit of members and the general public, The Gower Society objects to very few planning applications. Whilst sometimes the Society is blamed for an adverse decision, the public should realise that the Society has no more influence than any other member of the public making representations and the decisions are made by the local planning authority, not The Society.

We do enjoy a good working relationship with the Local Planning Authority and that is in spite of submission in December 2016 of 10 formal complaints on their perceived failure to enforce apparent breaches and we submitted a further 10 complaints last September. We do meet once a year with the Development, Conservation and Design manager of the Authority, and last August met him as well as the Director of Planning. The meetings are intended for us to gain a better understanding of their work so as to improve the manner and content of our written representations.

I should mention two schemes for which planning permission has been granted, namely a block of flats and another block or a hotel very close to Mumbles pier and 5 holiday houses in the disused Horton Quarry. We made representation regarding aspects of the implementation of the permission for the former and we attended, through London Counsel, the appeal against the Authority's enforcement notice in respect of engineering work in the quarry. It was well worth the expense of engaging Counsel, whose expert assistance was appreciated both by the Tribunal and by the Authority's solicitor. We were glad to join forces with the Penrice Estate initially in making written representations and did not hesitate latterly in going alone by appearing at the hearing.

In February Gordon attended part of the examination of the Local Authority's draft Local Development Plan. He was accompanied by Peter Padley and he made several pertinent points to the Inspector.

Finally, I want to mention two applications that might be of particular interest. An unsuccessful application to extend the caravan and camping site at Greenways for additional tourers and chalets was rejected. Further there is a pending application for temporary permission from April to September 2018 for 64 camping pitches at Gower Holiday Village in Scurlage. Similar applications have been rejected in the recent past including on appeal.

Communications

At present, this sub committee, which is chaired by Jill Burgess, has two current tasks. Firstly, it has been identified that our website, due to the passage of time since it was set up four years ago, is in need of further improvement or replacement. One weakness is easily identified. On doing a web search for 'Gower', the Society does not even appear on the first page. An ad hoc trio, including Alan Bailey, is investigating its weaknesses in relation to our needs and will report to the Communications Committee at its next meeting on the 22nd May.

It is envisaged that we will then engage a consultant further to advise and to do the revision work.

Secondly, like all organisations who hold personal data on people with whom they communicate, the Society has to comply with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation which comes into effect on the 25th May 2018. We cannot keep and use data such as addresses without the owner's consent. This applies to both members and others who happen to be in communication with us. We have to have a policy and either invite the owner's consent for us to retain that data and for specific purposes or give them the opportunity to require its removal from our list. A draft policy has been prepared and will be considered by the Communications Committee.

Alan Bailey has spent a lot of time and suffered much frustration in compiling electronic lists of members and of subscribers so we can communicate by email. He has uploaded members' email addresses from the membership list. He had to set up an account with a commercial organisation and had technical difficulty in January preventing him from sending out emails. He sought outside expert help and not for the first time. Eventually, 201 members signed up. Alan has also compiled a list of 138 people, not only members, who have subscribed to receive email "posts".

Other Activities

Talks

Jane Probert has successfully taken in hand the revival of talks. In the last year, we have had talks on Gower castles, the Vivian Family, Clyne Valley Brick Works, Penclawdd Cockle Industry, Oxwich Bird Ringing and Port Eynon Footprints, as well as the acclaimed reflections by a former Lord Mayor on his year in office. I expect Jane's good work will go from strength to strength.

Walks

These, again, have been collated by Anne Clarkson and Roger Brown. In the year there were 37 walks plus several jointly with the Rambler's Association. The advantage of the Society walks is that they are attended by a modest number of about 10 walkers, so they can proceed in a more manageable group. We would like to have a little more attendees. I am glad to report we have a number of new walk leaders. One walk that has repeat mention was around Edward & Ros Harris' Tredegar Fawr farm, both for its historic interest and liquid refreshment.

Programme

Roy coordinates the activities including Youth days for the programme leaflet twice a year running from the 1st April to 30th September and 1st October to 31st March.

The dispatch of the latest Programme was delayed to Wednesday 18th April, by which time one evening talk and two joint walks had taken place. This is not good, because it failed to

give in its usual written form notice to members of three events. It gives a bad impression and can cause disappointment to members.

The delay was due to the legal requirement to have our accounts audited because our income last year exceeded £1m. In all previous years the accounts had only to be examined because our income was well below the legal threshold. An audit involves an in depth scrutiny with checks rather than an examination. Consequently, it is a longer process.

We realised the audit would not be completed and the audited accounts printed in time for them, together with the Programme and Newsletter, to be sent before the end of March. Therefore we took steps to mitigate the inconvenience or disappointment likely to be caused to members.

We placed a notice on the website of those April events as, indeed, we always do when there are changes to the programme. Walkers, certainly, check the site for up to date details.

We also notified the 201 persons on Alan's members' list by electronic "posts". We hoped that those members not on our members' list would find the information on the website during periodic searching and by the end of March when they did not have the next programme leaflet.

I accept that some members do not use or regularly use our website, and most have not given us their email address. I apologise to those who were disappointed.

Regarding the Footprints talk on the 6 April, we did give written postal notice to members with the Journal at the end of November. In fact, 25 people attended the talk.

Prior to the posting of the programme, we were also investigating ways of avoiding the problem next year. I had a number of conversations with Roy Probert as well as a meeting with him and Audrey Frank. The conclusion is that, if the programme is likely again to be late, we either continue with the electronic notifications or we do an earlier separate posting of the programme albeit at an additional cost of around £500 postage.

However, I do not expect that we will have the same problem next year. Unless in the most unlikely event of another substantial inheritance, our income will be in the region of £60,000, well below the £1m threshold. Thus, instead of an audit, we will have an inspection which should take two to four weeks. Additionally, by using the website for publication of the trustees' report and accounts, we can avoid their printing, which takes about 3 weeks.

For your information, the accountants did not complete the audit because they had not received a response from Lloyd's Bank to whom they first applied on the 27th February and in spite of three subsequent telephone calls and three letters by me to Lloyd's Bank as well as the accountants' own telephone calls. In fact, Lloyd's Bank now say that we will not have the certificates until the 20th May. The accountants have had to make an appropriate note on their file and I trust it will be removed when they do hear from the bank.

The audited accounts were not issued until the 17th April, the day before the intended dispatch to members. With the note in the AGM notice, they were available for inspection on the site, or a paper copy from the secretary. We should follow this practice in future years because it will save some delay and the extra printing and postage costs of over £1,000. It also demonstrates to members, the public and potential members that we are doing our best to be environmentally friendly and up with the modern age. In fact, the constitution of the new incorporated charity provides for service of the AGM papers by either post or email, if members consent, or the website.

I can also assure members that we will continue to expand the members' list of emails. We were going to insert a notice in the newsletter inviting members to submit their email addresses, but that would not be legal unless we complied with the General Data Protection Regulation requiring us to have a policy demonstrating compliance and to provide a specially worded notice to each member.

With the benefit of information gained from other similar organisations, and attendance by three of our Communications sub committee members at a seminar recently, we have done the first draft policy.

This aspect of my report, deriving from the delay in issue of the publications leaflet, has unfortunately been lengthy but intended to dispel unfavourable perceptions of management and to show some of the considerable work conducted behind the scenes by committee members.

Outside Associations

We continue to play our part as members of outside bodies. Gordon Howe has for 30 years been a member of the Gower AONB partnership which comprises elected Council members and representatives from outside bodies. He has also been a member of the Gower Landscape Partnership which comprises City Council officers, representatives from the National Trust, NRW and Wildlife Trust. It had a total budget of £1.9m but of course, their work now ends with the cessation of Lottery funding.

I am a member of the City Council Local Action Group regarding the Rural Community Development Fund which issues grants from funds of approximately £450,000 a year.

Finally, the Society is a member of the Executive of the Alliance for Welsh Designated Landscapes that was formed in 2014 by the three National Parks voluntary societies, the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales and The Gower Society. The Alliance co-ordinates responses to Welsh Government consultation papers, policies and legislation. Its chairman is Professor Terry Marsden who was responsible 3 years ago for the Marsden Report on designated landscapes. Last Monday, as the representative on the Alliance for AONBs, I accompanied a representative from the Snowdonia National Park Society and Professor Marsden at a meeting with the Welsh Government Minister for the Environment to progress the implementation of the Marsden Report following the less acclaimed report in May 2017 by Lord Dafydd Elis-Thomas on Future Landscapes.

The Gower Society is playing its part, as expected by its members, in the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of Wales' designated landscapes.

The Future

There are three important aspects:

Committee

As already explained, we need volunteers for the main committee and/or sub committees. Demands on people's lives, whether young or older, often inhibit or prevent them from volunteering. This situation might be the catalyst for our employment on a part time basis of an administration officer who would take over the work of the Secretary and relieve the Chairman of some tasks and of a Planning Officer with some expertise in planning work as well as the time. One of the National Park Societies, comprising some 1,400 members, has five part time employees. The possible early retirement of the current secretary and my retirement as chairman in 12 months' time causes us now to focus on this aspect. A succession group has met and will report to the main committee at its meeting on the 29th May.

Incorporated Charitable Status

Following approval at last year's general meeting of our revised objects as required by the Charity Commission, the new charity was incorporated on the 9th May 2017. The Board of Trustees has met four times, and at its first meeting in July, a potential difficulty was identified regarding the current unincorporated charity being dissolved upon the transfer of all its assets to the new charity for it to become fully operational. Any future legacies to the Society, by reference to the dissolved charity's registration number, could lapse or become payable to another similar organisation, rather than the successor incorporated charity receiving the legacy. Our solicitors advised us to retain the old charity as a shell and the constitutions of both charities to contain the same objects, provide for the same trustees and declare they are linked. Thus, if the old unincorporated charity receives the legacy the trustees should transfer it to the incorporated charity. The unincorporated or shell charity will have no assets, having transferred them to the new charity, and would not otherwise operate. After having that advice from our solicitors, we took the precaution also of getting the written advice of a London barrister specialising in charity law. He confirmed the solicitor's advice and gave further advice on the content of the new constitution of the shell charity. Consequently, the solicitors redrafted the constitution which members will be asked to approve in the next general meeting immediately after this AGM. There will have to be a future meeting to approve an amended constitution of the incorporated charity providing expressly for the linkage. Both constitutions will then be submitted to the Charity Commission for approval as linked charities so the transfer can proceed.

The Board of Trustees is next due to meet on the 8th May. The board has agreed the powers to be reserved to it upon delegation of other administrative powers to a main committee. It will further discuss the powers to be delegated.

In March, we held an ‘away day’ for committee members, trustees and other closely working within the organisation with the view to preparing a strategic plan which will contain a summary of our priorities and will be backed by an action plan. Our discussion was facilitated by an outside expert who has since prepared first drafts of the documentation. The object of the exercise is to enable us to focus on where we want to go and how best to get there.

The Gorvin Inheritance

This is approximately £1.2m. We have, to date, received £455,000 and a further interim payment of £892,500 is imminent. The Committee has discussed in a number of meetings what to do with these monies. There was a special facilitated meeting on the 27th August 2017. The purpose of the meeting was not to identify specific uses at that stage but to establish a principle. It was agreed that the monies be ring-fenced and used on a specific project in which the Society retained a legal interest. There have since been suggestions of specific purposes, but the agreement is that the monies be invested on a short to medium term basis, two to three years (although not a fixed term) pending identification of objects of real appeal. Bequeathing her estate to three environmental charities, the late Mrs Gorvin expressly asked The Gower Society to use the gift ‘to establish a fund (for use in their general purposes) in memory of my late husband, Dr John Henry Gorvin’. It was not expressed as a condition, but as a request. However, it must be respected. The solicitors for the executors have confirmed that it may be used for specific objects and not necessarily general expenditure. I envisage in due course, some of the capital being expended on certain major projects and some of the capital invested to provide income.

The Board of Trustees, who will have responsibility for these monies when transferred over, has recently appointed Cazanove Capital, London, as investment managers of the inheritance monies. It will be called ‘the Gorvin Fund’.

I have reported at length. I am sorry but believe it is important for members, and the public, as this report will go on the website, to know of the extensive good work the Society continues to do, as indeed it has always done.