

The Gower Society
Charity registration number 258372 (CIO number
1172919)

Chairman's Report for AGM, Saturday 4th May 2019

In this report, I will give a résumé of the activities of the Society during the last year, 2018, pursuant to the constitution. This will then be followed by the present position concerning the intended change as a charity of an Association of Members to Incorporation and then the position regarding the substantial inheritance the Society received from the late Mrs Patricia Lillian Gorvin who died in August 2016.

Main Committee

Excluding the officers, the number of ordinary members of the main committee can be 15. We had nine members carrying forward six vacancies from 2017. One member resigned for personal reasons during the year. Therefore, we have seven vacancies. In addition three members retire but two offer themselves for re-election. Trusting you will later deem it appropriate to re-elect the two members and Gordon Howe a Vice Chairman, and unless there are further nominations notified during the course of this meeting, not previously notified, the Society will have only six main committee members out of a maximum of 15, plus of course the five officers.

Whilst this certainly is on the light side, and it is regrettable members do not offer themselves for service, the burden on the main committee was last year and is continuing to be relieved by a number of co-opted members on the sub committees and by the board of trustees of the new incorporated charity. The board deals with financial matters on behalf of the existing unincorporated charity in anticipation of the new charity receiving the assets and assuming full responsibility for the financial affairs of the Society.

In commending and thanking the main committee members for all the work that they have done, I include also the co-opted members for their particular expertise and interest that they contribute to their respective sub committees.

In addition, there have been other members who, although not on a committee, have made significant contributions. Namely, the GSYA

group, our webmaster Alan Bailey, the talks organiser Jane Probert, the programme co-ordinator Roy Probert and the loyal band of staffers who put up the mail, led by Christine Pearce and including the compulsory male Gerald Gabb. And the folk dancers led by Grace Birt must not be overlooked.

Our secretary, Audrey Frank, retires today. She has done four years distinguished service to the Society and in other ways to the community of Gower. She has moved to pastures new, an urban life at Clifton, Bristol. I repeat last year: she has been a trojan. She will be dearly missed by all of us individually and by the Society. She will be remembered with great affection. Her workload was increased, not without confusion, by the fact that she had to do the work of the two Gower Society charities, but she never panicked or complained and did everything that was asked of her and, without even telling us, more besides. One of my lasting memories of her will be her assembling the tables and chairs in this room as if they were made of lightweight plastic.

We welcome, subject to your later approval, her successor, Sarah Samuel, once of Cover To Cover fame.

Finally, with regard to the main committee, I must thank two members. Maggie Cuthbert, who resigned during the year, was valuable particularly for her smiling presence and subsequently, with her banking background, helping Hildegard Roberts in trawling through some 190 bank statements in January to record membership subscription receipts. Jerry Kingham, who has been on the committee since 2013 and chaired the Rural Communities sub committee since 2015, dealing with the making of grants, retires. He has worked conscientiously and dealt with applications with sympathy and tact.

Sub committees and groups

Membership

As at January, we had 923 members, an increase of 25 on last year. As this figure includes family members, we have well over 1000 individual members. It is hardly surprising that most members are recruited at the Gower Show where the public are always impressed with the Society content of our displays. It remains easy to join by downloading from our website the membership application and standing order forms and

posting them to the membership secretary. So many people say 'I have been meaning to join but I have never got round to it'. The subscription of £20 is cheap.

Being membership secretary is the number one headache job. Trawling the bank statements is laborious but it is made worse by many receipts not being fully identifiable and some still at the previous lower rates. Hildegard makes a point in reporting at each committee meeting the current number of members. She has to deal with a lot more than membership applications and subscriptions. Her work goes unseen.

Hopefully, it will be made easier with the new website which is in the making.

Publications

This committee of six comprises mainly co-opted members and is chaired by Rod Cooper. Their work in their bi monthly meetings has been dominated by the revision of the Society's pocket sized book, 'A Guide to Gower'. The last edition, the 6th, was published as long ago as 1999. All co-opted members have their own particular experience or expertise. It is now very close to completion.

The Society's Gower Journal continues to be high class under the strict joint editorship of Malcolm and Ruth Ridge. The 69th was launched at the publication's morning in November, together with a monograph of Ernest Morgan regarding his work as the first Swansea Borough architect from 1913 to 1947. He is, not to be forgotten, a founder member of the Society. He designed many well known structures and buildings in Swansea, fortunately most survived the last War. They range from Oystermouth Library, the Black Pill Electricity Sub Station and the Cenotaph, to the Central Police Station and a number of schools including Townhill. His plans for the future layout of Swansea included a boulevard along to the Guildhall, which he helped to design. The book is well worth a read.

Talks

Thanks to Jane Probert, these are growing in number and interest. We will have had six in this last season, including one on Mumbles Pier arranged by our President, and one on pubs in Mumbles in Gower that

filled this room. That serves to dispel the public notion that all the Society cares about is flora, fauna and old buildings.

Special Projects

Again, conscientiously chaired by Guto ap Gwent, this sub committee deals with grants in excess of £5,000 for projects in the Lordship. Because of the amount, these projects tend to be over a longer period of time, and so during their course to some extent supervised by the sub committee. In the last year, there have been two major projects, which were close on the heels of the restoration of the bells in the churches of Cheriton and Llanmadoc. Improvements in ten sections of the Gower Way started beginning with work in Dunvant and has continued with locations in Three Crosses and Mynydd y Gwair. It should be completed this year. A substantial sum towards these works has been committed. Future locations, which should be completed this year, will be in Rhossili, Reynoldston, Llethryd, Gowerton and Grovesend.

The other project is the continuing rebuilding of the entire wall in Mewslade Valley. It was commenced in 2017. All stones are from the original wall. There have been two masons working on separate parts, but primarily one, who works alone and in all weather. The Wales Coastal path passes through the wall, which is breathtaking. We have tended to support the rebuilding of walls in South West Gower, as that is where many prominent dilapidated walls are located, but we are keen to venture further afield, preferably in significant or prominent locations. You will hear more about the wall and see pictures of it later in this meeting. The committee has also, in conjunction with the Rural Communities Committee, approved a joint contribution to the City and County of Swansea to assist in their work in applying for the AONB to gain a Dark Sky Community Award. This will necessitate the updating of the current Gower AONB lighting guide, a lighting management plan and an action plan for improvement.

Towards the end of the year, dialogue began again with the Local Authority for assistance towards developing a Gower Hedgerow Hub, which will involved maintaining and improving hedgerows and tuition.

Rural Communities

This committee, chaired by Jerry Kingham, awarded 19 grants for projects ranging from programmes for musical events and walks to

improvements in chapels and churches, footpaths and the Mewslade Wall. It also supported a project at Pennard School commemorating the work of Vernon Watkins.

Planning

The Planning Committee has continued its high profile work of perusing the lists of planning applications and decisions on the City and County of Swansea website. Along with other interested parties it has made representations to the Authority. Its chairman, Gordon Howe, identified 197 of approximately 2,700 applications received as of potential significance for scrutiny by the other members of the committee on rota. We commented on 51 and objected to 40, ie 1.5%. I do ask members to make a point of remembering this low percentage figure so to respond to members of the public who believe the Society objects to any application for development in the Lordship of Gower. The committee members on rota report back to Gordon who drafts any relevant letters for their approval and transmission to the Authority.

The Society also brings to the attention of the Authority perceived breaches of planning law. This is done by making formal complaints. It submitted a batch of 11 cases in early 2018 and has liaised with the Authority on progress. Some cases have been resolved and others remain ongoing. At times the committee feels frustrated with slow progress, as the Authority, rightly or wrongly, endeavours to resolve breaches by discussion with the transgressors rather than direct expensive enforcement action. Whilst in the previous year, the committee proceeded to the next step in the process towards a formal complaint to the Ombudsman as to lack of action by first making a formal complaint to the Chief Executive of the Authority. It held back formal action in the year because informal enforcement progress has been made, albeit sometimes slow. Gordon and I do meet twice a year with planning officials. This has helped to improve mutual understanding and our respect for the work the Authority does. I should mention two significant matters in which the Society was involved in the year. The first concerned the unauthorised extensive removal of rock from the face of the long disused quarry in Horton. The Authority served an Enforcement Notice against which the owner appealed. There followed a Hearing before the Inspector. The Society was represented by London Counsel who made a worthy contribution to the Hearing. The Appeal was dismissed and the owner was required to undertake some restoration work as well as close down the quarry.

He had been granted planning permission for holiday dwellings in the quarry. He has not, to date, proceeded with that development.

The other matter concerned the use of a field at North Hills Holiday Park, Penmaen, that ran alongside the lane from the caravan camping park to the road at Penmaen Church. It was being used as a car park, not only for the site but visitors off site. Part of the field close to the site buildings and café was used for tables and benches. The owner applied for a Lawful Development Certificate to which he would have been entitled, notwithstanding the absence of planning permission, if he was able to show that vehicles had used the field every summer season for at least ten years before the application date. It was unsightly as well as a nuisance to nearby neighbours. The Society made representations which were drafted by the same barrister used for Horton Quarry. The application, which was dealt with on paper, was rejected. The Authority relied to a considerable extent on the comprehensive representations by the Society, including the legal aspects of the case. Whilst the parking has now ceased, it is taking place on isolated days as it can occur lawfully up to a maximum of 28 days per year.

You will see photographs of Horton Quarry and the North Hills site at the end of this meeting.

In both cases, the Society submitted its own aerial photographs of the sites going back to 2006. The Society undertakes these surveys twice a year and they have proved very useful as a historical record and in identifying alleged breaches. The photography has generated complaints of intrusion but we have met both complainants and allayed their concerns. Google Earth undertakes similar photography which is easily available to the public. It is from a somewhat higher altitude and not always of areas of particular concern to us. In most cases, Google Maps are sufficient for our purposes. They are improving and I envisage in time we might discontinue our own surveys. We undertook them only when the Local Planning Authority discontinued their own.

Communications

This committee, chaired by Jill Burgess, has undertaken two important tasks. Firstly, to comply with the law that came into force on the 25th May 2018, the committee drafted a General Data Protection Privacy Statement setting out the data held on individual members and what

we do to protect it. The data is important because it enables the Society to maintain the individuals membership as well as to communicate with members about the Society's activities. The data must be removed at the member's request and members are able to unsubscribe from emails clicking the appropriate link on any email. These emails are sent both to members and to non members who subscribe giving details of the Society's activities, as you are aware.

The other matter is a revision of the website. The current website was designed five or six years ago. It serves its purpose. In 2017, we began to identify some weaknesses with the site in sending out emails and making changes, as well as its fragility to scammers and viruses. Due to these difficulties, and as the internet has been changing rapidly, and so have designs, we sought professional help in order to get the best out of the web. Rather than tinker with it, we decided on a new design. It also had the advantage of appealing to the public who would identify the Society as being in line with the latest developments. The site has been created. Existing and new data has been included. It is very near to being launched. The committee have had a preview and were impressed. The designers, who are based in Swansea, were appointed after a competition process.

It is important that we keep up with the times. There is the well known saying 'if it works, don't fix it', but I rather prefer another 'if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change' . [Prince of Lampedusa].

Youth

This group, which is chaired by Catherine Jones and assisted by Joan Darbyshire, the secretary, has maintained its work of introducing children to outdoor activities in Gower and to promote it by making grants and projects in local schools. Led by Dawn Thomas, an experienced and accredited youth leader who works full time in this field, there were eight monthly activities that included bird watching, fossil hunting, woodland foraging and mini beast hunting. GSYA membership increased from 118 to 194 children in the year. Unfortunately, an overnight camp in September had to be cancelled because of the weather.

Dawn undertook 25 field courses for various local schools financed by the Society. Due to a lack of funding by schools, there has been an increasing demand on the Society to undertake these courses. A total of 917 children went. We had particular sympathy for some schools in

deprived areas, subsidising their transport costs. The group awarded grants up to £750 maximum for 19 school projects that included developing woodland areas, planters, gardens and a pond.

Outside bodies

We continue to play our part as members of outside bodies.

We support the Gower Show with our tent and sponsorship. We are one of the highest sponsors. The tent attracted many visitors. The displays were commented upon most favourably. Our thanks go to Guto ap Gwent and his team.

The Society through Gordon Howe remained a member of the Gower AONB partnership group, which comprises elected Council members and representatives from outside bodies, and the HLF Landscape Partnership Board.

I represent the Society on the City Council's local action group for the rural community development fund, which issues grants for funds towards projects such as improving transport in Gower, creating information and bistro café hubs and improving the appearance of Port Eynon.

The Society is also a member of the executive of the Alliance for Welsh Designated Landscapes which comprises the three National Parks voluntary societies, the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales and The Gower Society. In recent years, there have been two reports, Marsden and Elis Thomas, on the future of designated landscapes, and further to the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015. The Alliance is concerned with the future use and extent of protected landscapes in Wales and makes written helpful representations to Welsh Government and other environmental bodies.

The Gorvin Inheritance

I reported last year that we had to date received an interim payment and a further payment was imminent. The full sum was duly received and placed with Cazanove Capital Investment Managers in a fund with the aim of maintaining its real value in line with inflation and provide an income of approximately 3% per annum. It is at a risk level of medium. The fund is specifically designated 'the John Henry Gorvin Fund'.

I also reported last year that the committee had resolved that the monies be ring-fenced and used on a specific project in which the Society retains a legal interest. No particular project was in mind, or has since been identified. This principle was reviewed last month by the board of trustees which gave specific guidance to the principle in resolving that capital can be applied to an exceptional or outstanding project in furtherance of the preservation, conservation and enhancement of the physical and natural environment of the Lordship that is either

1. For the acquisition of property in which the Society has a legal interest, or
2. Is enduring.

In essence, it is either to buy property or for something that is long lasting. But the project has to be exceptional or outstanding and in furtherance of our main object. It would be wrong to use the money for run of the mill projects for which we give grants, because obviously, the more we reduce capital, the less income we have to service grants.

Incorporation

Incorporation is a new status introduced by the Charities Act 2011. It enables a charity to be set up as a separate legal entity rather than an association of members. The main advantage is that it protects its individual members and committee members from legal liability. It is still under the scrutiny of the Charity Commission and its trustees remain personally accountable if they do not act prudently and in the best interests of the charity. I am told that adoption of this new status was mooted by Professor John Beardmore who was our treasurer at the time of the new Charities Act. We have since passed resolutions in general meeting to advance towards achieving the new status. In May 2017, the new charity was incorporated. It will become fully operational as The Gower Society when the assets of the old charity are transferred over. The intention was then to dissolve the old charity, but, with the benefit of legal advice, we resolved last year to retain the old charity as a shell so that it captures any future legacies left to The Gower Society by reference to the old charity number, rather than risk the legacies lapsing or being paid to a different charity of similar objects. The shell charity would then pay the legacies over to the new incorporated charity. Both charities have to be linked formally by the Charity Commission.

Applications to the Charity Commission for permission to transfer the assets and to link the charities were submitted last year. I am glad to report that on the 24th April 2019 the Commission granted permission for the transfer and confirmed the old charity would be linked to the incorporated charity. The next and final stage will be the drafting of a deed of transfer of assets by our London based barrister, followed by formal completion. Whilst the governance and management of the business of the Society will be conducted by the incorporated Society, and the old charity not operating, the business of the Society will remain unchanged.

The Trustees will have full responsibility for the Society, but they will delegate their management function to a management committee just like the main committee of the existing charity. Subject to his election today, and of which I have no doubt, Guto ap Gwent will be the chairman of that committee. I will continue as chairman of the board of trustees, which will be responsible for governance and finance.

I conclude on a personal note. Whilst it is a somewhat hackneyed expression, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to be chairman of The Gower Society. There have been some moments of difficulty but nevertheless a pleasure to associate with people, particularly my committee, who are passionate about the wellbeing of the Gower environment. The privilege has been as chairman of an organisation that is much respected in this part of Wales.