

The Gower Society

Charity Registration Number 1172919

Chairman's Report for AGM Saturday 24th October 2020

Introduction

This Report covers the period for the year ending on the 31st December 2019, being in line with the period to which the Financial Statements relate and the Report of the Trustees covers. The work of the Society in 2020 will be covered in the Chairman's Report at next year's AGM, although I will update you when necessary.

In fact, I refer members to the Report of Trustees which has accompanied the Financial Statements, both of which members will have read. That Report explains in detail the Society's objectives, activities, achievements, financial position and governance and management structure. I do strongly commend it to members. Because of the length of the combined Report and Statements document, it was not posted to members with the notice of this meeting, but, as members will have gathered, it is easily accessible by the private link given in the notice. I very much regret it is not available on the website for all the world to know that The Gower Society is an organisation of real substance, doing outstanding work, deserving of being supported and joined by all the residents of Gower and its visitors. The reason, further to the advice of an expert on fraud, is to limit the publicity of our financial situation so to reduce the threat of fraudulent attack, which nowadays can never be dismissed. Likewise we no longer give our bank details on the standing order form on the website.

Instead of detailing the activities, and referring to the individuals who by their voluntary good work have brought them about, I will list our achievements after outlining to you the structure of the Society.

However, I must first congratulate our President on his elevation to the House of Lords in October 2019. His title "Baron Davies of Gower in the County of Swansea" reflects his proud heritage as well as enhances the profile of the Society.

Structure

Members will be aware from my Report given at the last AGM on the 24th October 2019, as well as the Trustees Report, that the Society is now a charitable incorporated organisation, as opposed previously to an unincorporated charity, with a new constitution approved in general meeting in April 2017. Unlike the previous charity, the Society has its own legal entity separate from its Trustees, Committee Members and Ordinary Members, all of whom are now relieved of potential legal liability, should there have been any claim against them. Previously, the Main Committee Members were personally responsible, and with recourse to each member personally for compensation. The Society can now bring claims and own property in its own name, rather than in the names of individuals.

It became fully operational as an incorporated charity on the 20th August 2019 when all the assets of the Society were transferred to the new charity from the old charity. This was made possible following permission for transfer given by the Charity Commission on the 24th April 2019, the Commission directing both charities be formally linked as of the 24th June 2019. The old charity has existed from the 20th August 2019 on paper only, and with a basic constitution that had been approved in general meeting in May 2018, providing for no members, no officers and no meetings. It exists solely to receive legacies left to the Society with the old charity number.

It is important that I mention of Guto ap Gwent, the Chairman of the Society under the old charity for explanatory information to members, but, more importantly, out of personal deference to him. When the old charity effectively ceased to exist on the 20th August 2019, his office as Chairman ended. It was a very premature end, having commenced at the AGM barely five months before. Accordingly, whilst he has continued to be a Vice Chairman of the new incorporated charity, we were inevitably deprived of the benefit of his leadership as Chairman of the old charity after only a few months in office. I acknowledge, and with personal affection, the contribution he made to the Society during that short period and I am sure he takes considerable comfort from the fact that he followed in the footsteps of his father, Dr Gwyn Jones, who was chairman from 1953 to 1962 and one of the founders of the Society. After his family, but close behind, Guto's next commitment in life is to the Society.

Responsibility for the operation of the Society rests on the Trustees who, in spite of the incorporated status, must act prudently and responsibly. They,

and no one else, are the ones who are in the firing line. They are responsible for the governance of the Society, principally matters of strategy, policy and financial performance, but also for the management of the day to day running of the Society. However, pursuant to their power in the constitution, they have delegated that management function to a Main Committee, which operates exactly as the old Main Committee, but focused on the day to day running of the Society free of the other responsibilities which I have outlined that remain with the Trustees. The delegation has properly been effected by the Trustees' appointment of each member of the Main Committee and, for the benefit of the Committees as well as the Trustees, the issue of terms of reference to the Main Committee and its sub committees. Apart from the Board monitoring the good work of the Committees, both entities have their separate functions. Whilst Trustees can be and are members of the Main Committee, in view of the contributions they can make, it is important that they remain in the minority of members of the Main Committee and vice versa as far as the Board is concerned, hence the amendment to the Constitution as will be proposed at the Special Meeting immediately following this meeting.

There are 11 trustees out of a constitutionally permitted maximum of 12 and 11 main committee members, a number that includes 5 trustees, of a maximum of 20.

Achievements

The awarding of grants for projects in the Lordship of Gower based on set criteria corresponding to the objects of the Society is one of the primary activities of the Society overshadowed at times, particularly in the eyes of the general public, by our work in scrutinising and making comment on planning applications. The Grants Committee approved 19 applications, although it considered several more but they did not meet the criteria. They totalled £37,100. The projects included work on footpaths, restoration of churches, City Council lighting scheme and the Gower Show. In addition, through the Youth Section, £6,900 was paid to cover the cost of the Youth Section monthly activity days and £11,200 for trips and projects by schools. The total sum of grants was £71,201, an increase of £10,000 on the previous year. The Society always makes it a condition of the award of a grant that the recipient makes a public acknowledgement, so that the members of their organisation as well as the general public are made aware of the source of the grant.

The work of the Planning Committee has a much higher profile, because, without fear or favour, it makes representations, sometimes adverse as far as the Applicant is concerned, to the Planning Authority on monthly planning applications in and around Swansea. However, it is important to stress, as I have always done, that the Society objects to a very small number of applications. It usually comments constructively rather than objects. The assiduous work of the Planning Committee is an achievement in itself. It scrolls the monthly list of all applications received and identifies those of particular relevance to the Society's objects. The Committee peruses the documents supporting the applications and prepares the letters of representation. In addition, it conducts an aerial survey twice a year photographing from an appropriate distance, most locations in the AONB, not only to identify any suspected breaches of planning law, but to maintain a record for future reference purposes. The photography is similar to that found on Google, but with the precise date and of locations of particular interest. This record is particularly useful to deal with assertions of established historical use after a qualifying fixed term rendering unauthorised developments lawful.

I am pleased to report a resurgence of activity by the Publications Committee. Apart from being responsible for the annual journal, the Committee has focused for nearly two years on the production of a seventh edition to A Pocket Guide to Gower which was first published in 1965. An attractive pocket sized book containing a gazetteer and seventeen short chapters on all aspects of Gower including its castles, dialect, fishes and birds. 1,000 copies were printed and sales have gone well. The Committee, on a roll, are considering its next publication.

I have mentioned the Youth Section in connection with the grant made to it for its monthly day activities as well as grants direct to schools. The family activities every month, except January, August and December, teach children and their parents about the natural history of Gower. Because of the pandemic, they have been suspended in 2020, but instead the organiser prepared videos, which are on the website, such as findings on the sea shore. I can vouch these videos are of interest to adults as much as to children. The organiser undertook 25 school trips, funded by the Society with a total of 18 different schools taking part representing 1,102 students with an average group size of 44 children. This was particularly valuable to schools who do not always have the funding and the appropriate expertise to undertake the trips. Seven grants totalling £5,000 were given for environmental projects at school premises for outdoor learning.

The Membership Team have laboured at their work as assiduously as ever, cross checking receipts of subscriptions, usually in January by standing order and chasing members for non payment or payment at the old rate (and there are very many of those). It does make their work much more laborious by some members not paying by standing order.

As usual, the Society had a marquee at the Gower Show. It was well attended and as successful as ever with a variety of displays. The show did not take place this year (2020) because of the pandemic. That was particularly unfortunate as we always succeed in recruiting at least 30 new members in the marquee. The Society's grant to the Show is about the largest of all donations.

Lastly, I have to report on the work of the Communications Committee. It is far from least in the work of all the Committees, particularly in 2019. At the end of the year, the new website went live. It replaced the previous site that had served us well for several years, but needed replacing in view of rapidly evolving formats of websites. Members should look at it more often than they do. Whilst somewhat behind the times, I am glad to report we are now progressing with electronic communication, with Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, all of which came into being at the end of the year and at the beginning of 2020. We now have a PayPal facility on the website for joining members.

Finally, I must mention the programme of talks and walks. The number of talks generally in the winter months has increased, and in the year the topics included knotweed, wildflower conservation, Ludwig Mond, Edgar Evans and Mumbles lifeboat. Attendance averages 40 members. The walks programme has been full and includes a series of walks on the Gower Coast Path. Attendance at walks is usually limited to about 8 to 10 people, which is a very comfortable and practical number.

The Future

But what I have been saying is the past and restricted primarily to 2019. Members will be aware of most of it having read the Trustees Report. It is the future that we must be concerned about, and indeed there is reason to be concerned.

Firstly, there is membership. At the end of the year, we had 923 members, which is only 4 up on 2018. As that number includes family members, we

would have well in excess of 1,000 individual members. It might seem an impressive figure, but far from it. The number has been stagnant over the years, but with younger, as well as older, people becoming increasingly concerned with the environment, as well as its natural beauty, we should have many more members. It is not because the work of The Gower Society is not known. It is known, although not as universally as the Society deserves. With the membership application and standing order forms being accessible on the website, coupled with payment by PayPal, it is now much easier to make the effort to join. We shall see what improvement this brings, but I suspect not as great as it should. We often hear friends say 'I've been meaning to join for years, but haven't got round to it'. It is up to us members to promote it, but it usually does not occur to us at a convenient moment. We should adopt a recruitment campaign. We have explored publicity at the rear of buses, although that is very expensive. It has occurred to me we could have a vehicle or mobile unit in the car park at Rhossili with, of course, the consent of the National Trust. We could also consider employing, for a limited period, an experienced recruitment manager. We should succeed in recruiting at least 500 more members. I am not so much concerned with income from more subscriptions but the enhancement of our profile, which is particularly important in our stance on planning matters. However, there is work to do, as I outline later, before we can expect a membership increase.

My other concern relates to the Main Committee, which as you have heard, manages the day to day affairs of the Society. It does the hard graft. They are the unsung heroes. I say from the outset that every member of the Main Committee works really hard, and the Committee has been functioning well since its formal appointment in January 2020. However, the Committee has failed to appoint a Chairman. They have had three meetings, but a candidate has not emerged. No one is both willing and able to do the task. It is a ship with all hands working hard on deck, but has no one to plot its course and sail it into port. To my mind, it needs at least another five new members, and from that new cohort there is a good chance that a suitable candidate will emerge. Indeed, it would be no bad thing for the Chairman to be new to the workings of the Main Committee as they would have their own ideas and approach, not influenced by the past, because the Society must evolve as times change and rapidly so at present.

The Society also faces challenges from outside. I remind members of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 which affirms the protected status of AONBs and the statutory requirement on public bodies to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of AONBs.

Prospective developers are frequently challenging this concept and the Local Planning Authority are granting permission for some developments that clearly are in conflict with it. In 2010, the Welsh Government issued its Technical Advice Note 6 permitting One Planet Developments involving either single homes, cooperative communities or larger settlements in the open countryside with no exception in the case of AONBs as long as they provide for the minimum needs of the inhabitants in terms of income, food, energy and waste assimilation. After some hesitation, the Local Planning Authority, in its policy CV2, lists One Planet Developments as one of the exceptions, alongside existing rural business expansions and affordable housing, to the presumption against development in the countryside. The Authority has pending the first OPD application, which is for two homes in Lunnun. Times are changing, and rapidly, and the Gower AONB is more vulnerable. The Gower Society can no longer object to developments in the open countryside if they are *bona fide* one of the listed exceptions. We lose credibility if we do object. A few years ago, we did not object to the affordable housing development in Scurlage and indeed, gave them a design award.

There is increasing pressure on the Society to be vigilant and properly focused in its objection or comment. We are now very fortunate to be possessed of the financial capital that enables us to engage experts. No longer can we say, "It is in the AONB".

This year, there was an application to the Planning Authority for permission for the temporary use of land in The Vile on Rhossili headland for the sale of seafood from a removable timber catering unit for up to a total of 28 days in any calendar year. The Certificate was granted, although it was not needed, as certain activities are permitted up to 28 days. In fact, the shack sold sunflowers as much as seafood (lawful) and we understand exceeded the 28 days period. It proved very popular with the public. It was contrary to the historic use of The Vile, which is a rare survival of an open field system of communal agriculture. It could also encourage other shacks for other purposes. The Society intends, with the support of other local bodies, to apply to the Planning Authority for an Article 4 Direction which restricts the scope of permitted development rights, either in relation to a particular area, or a particular type of development.

Billy Butlin tried in 1948 to have a holiday camp at Rhossili and as a consequence, the Society successfully campaigned for the AONB status. That status is no longer a comfort.

There are major challenges looming and the Society is going to have to be smart in dealing with them. Applicants often plead the benefit to the local rural economy whereas, in fact, they have only one beneficiary in mind, and that is not the economy.

Whilst I have dealt with some challenges of a planning nature, there could well also be changes in the nature of projects for grants. Congregations in several cases are in single figures in Gower churches and are not going to increase in the foreseeable future. Indeed, they might dwindle even more with churchgoers during the pandemic lockdown enjoying services on the internet from the comfort of their own home. Some of the diehards will be out of the habit of going to church and will choose the easy option of following services on the internet in other parts of the country that appeal to them. Some Gower churches will be under a very real threat of closure. The same applies to chapels. They are one of the major beneficiaries of our grants. Other projects might take their place, or our scope could become more limited.

There are serious changes and threats ahead and not far away. The Society will need more support by way of more ordinary members and Main Committee members. That would give the Society more clout in dealing with those developments which have an adverse and eroding effect on the natural beauty and they have got more frequent and complicated.

Conclusion

The long, and sometimes tedious and tiring, process towards incorporation is over. We have a model that provides a proper foundation on which the Society can operate effectively, primarily as custodians of some considerable wealth and as conservators of the natural beauty of Gower.

The next stage before embarking on a recruitment campaign is to ensure the Society reflects what the public, particularly the 25 to 50 age group, would expect of us. It is more than simply promoting the natural beauty but what people want of our Gower so they can enjoy and appreciate it alongside its natural beauty. The public is increasingly focused on environmental issues, such as carbon and plastic pollution and energy creation. If the Society does not become proactive in promoting environmental projects that appeal to the public, alongside the natural beauty, it will find itself out on a limb and be

regarded with limited relevance. Another more appealing conservation charity could well be formed alongside the Society.

We must evolve with the times, failing which the Society really will, as I stated in my inaugural address in 2015, wither on the vine. "If you get what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got", so it has been said. We can, and deserve, to do better than that. Membership numbers will rise from stagnation.

This is my final Chairman's report. My predecessor handed the baton to me 5 years ago and, after a challenging leg, sometimes against strong wind, I am glad to see he is still on the track so I can pass it back to him, assuming, although I am sure, he will be elected Chairman to-day. I wish him and the Society well.