

AGM 2019: CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

It gives me great pleasure to present my Chairman's Report for the Church Stretton & South Shropshire Arts Festival (the "Festival" Festival year. This has been my second year as Chairman and like the first has been another incredibly busy year at certain times. When absorbed on Festival matters such that I have been 'absent', or on certain Festival aspects, I have been most fortunate to have the support of my wife, Elaine, for which I wish to express my great thanks.

When the University student expressed his surprise to the Professor of Economics that the second year exam papers were the same this year as last year, the Professor replied "yes but the answers are different this year". Akin to this, the rest of my Report follows the same structure as last year but the content is very different!

An immediate example of the content change, however, is my making a quick comment now about the 2019 Festival. This was undoubtedly "one of the best" for many reasons that will be explained later.

Organisational: Structure & People

As a Registered Charity and for general good order, we do need to have structure to our operations with full and open co-ordination between all the elements of our efforts. The Festival year began with nine Trustees, namely Gloria Carter, Ian Davis, Pat Gibson, Graham Lewis, Kath Stephenson, Roger Stokes, Claire Tocknell, Richard Yeoman-Clark and I. For our regular Festival Committee meetings two permanent guests were also invited, Graham Cossins and Sue Mitchell. This ensured that all elements of the Festival were suitably represented in discussion and decision-making at the governing meetings (at which only Trustees had voting rights) at which the workload ever increases.

The very effective sub-committee (working groups) approach was substantially maintained - to good effect - with some changes to the people in the groups. In addition, there were also others like Richard Walker, for example, who as organiser of our free events, worked very hard for the Festival over the year, linking with the (sub-)committees. Over the year I have learned even more about the work undertaken by the many individuals in this structure and how all have worked together really well to deliver the aims & objectives of the Festival. I believe it was much enjoyed by all with the reward of running such a wonderful Festival with many enjoyable personal experiences.

Early in the Festival year, our Treasurer & Trustee Ian Davis advised me that he wished to retire at the end of the Festival year to have more time to pursue other interests. Ian has been Treasurer for some eight years and with his accounting & business experience from the commercial world has worked tirelessly to ensure our accounting is of a very high standard with strong processes & controls and also with systems easily capable of being taken over by a successor. Also he has ensured that we fully comply with the requirements of the Charities Commission. So as Ian retires today, on behalf of us all I thank him sincerely for his great work for the Festival.

Just after the Festival, our Technical Director & Trustee Richard Yeoman-Clark collapsed and was rushed to hospital. He was seriously ill but fought hard to recover but sadly lost that battle last month. In a slightly better period of his illness, a lifelong friend visiting him in hospital said that he had mentioned all the applause that he received from the audience at the last Festival event at Concord College when the performers thanked him from the stage for the quality of his sound & lighting. Richard said how immensely proud he was to receive such applause.

[Before continuing request a short silence in memory of RY-C.]

Richard's CV in itself was very impressive but we have learned since of the extent of his work over the years with prominent bands, sound production for many well-known events, setting up the technical capability of specific venues etc. An undoubted expert he worked really hard and to wonderful effect for the Festival as well as in the community generally. His attention to quality and detail was of the highest order and he worked so wonderfully well & patiently with many different performers. He made equipment he owned available for some of our Festival and other community events. His legacy will continue, however, to some extent in that he has requested that his equipment used for various events in the community is left with those organisers for future usage.

Early this month our Drama Director & Trustee Graham Lewis resigned for personal reasons. In very difficult circumstances, Graham managed and attended the successful varied programme of 2019 Drama & Spoken Word events he had booked, for which the booking in itself required much effort. With his wealth of experience he achieved a very successful programme with larger audiences than in recent years. We shall miss that experience as we move forward. On behalf of us all I thank Graham for all that he has contributed to and achieved for the Festival.

Our efforts to recruit a new Treasurer & Trustee have been successful with Eleanor Watters being put forward for election later in this meeting. Whilst Eleanor and her husband have had a property in Church Stretton for a few years, visiting from time to time, it is only recently that Eleanor has retired and fully moved here. A qualified accountant, with much valuable and relevant experience, she will undoubtedly prove to be an excellent recruit for the Festival in many regards. I am delighted she will be joining the team and hope she will find some challenges and plenty of reward as she works with us all.

Effort has already started to recruit a Technical Director and a Drama Director to join the Festival Committee. Ideally both recruits will be Trustees from outset. For the technical role, to run many of our events requires someone with experience of staging live performances, liaising with performers in the process. It has become evident that we also need sufficient back up in case of sudden unavailability. This will be fully taken into account. Various avenues to pursue have been identified and will be taken forward. More generally, there is also the need to increase the number of Trustees and this will also be addressed in the coming year.

Sandra Whitlock has agreed to join the Festival Committee as a permanent guest taking over responsibility for First Aid and certain risk related matters, giving some relief for others on the Committee. As one of the First Aid team, a Senior Steward at the Exhibition and an attendee at Festival events, I very much welcome Sandra to the Festival Committee and am sure she will make a valuable contribution to our efforts.

Volunteers, Sponsors, Supporters and Friends of the Festival

Volunteers are also vital to the running and success of the Festival. Once again come the Festival not only did nearly all helpers of many years offer their services again but also new volunteers approached us, or agreed when we approached them. This at least maintained the ranks for the Exhibition, for events and for the distribution of publicity material. All volunteers have worked to our high Festival standards and I thank every one of them for their part.

Our sponsors have continued to provide generous support which is much appreciated and a vital source of income. Despite facing tighter budgets and more demands for their support, the continuance of existing sponsors has been much welcomed. We also found some new sponsors for 2019 and will strive to repeat this for 2020. Our supporters likewise faced the same pressures but they have helped us again this year which is very much welcomed. Thanks are also due to the various venues that made their premises available for our use leading up to and during the Festival. .

The “Friends of the Festival” arrangement offering advanced bookings, price reductions and priority seating at School events has again been very popular. This provides a substantial source of our ticket sales and Exhibition visitors - a vital component of our Festival that will doubtless continue. We thank our Friends for their attendances and also for all the others who swelled the audiences and visitor numbers at the Exhibition.

New Developments in 2019

With our previous Graphic Designer stepping down after the 2018 Festival, there was great need to find a suitable replacement. Matthew (Matt) Mills Graphic Design was approached by a third party on our behalf and Matt Mills was soon ‘on board’. His suggestions and design work has led us to our new logo, new designs for nearly all our publicity material and an even stronger emphasis on branding & design being more consistent throughout our extensive range of material. The Trustees have been delighted with his work and we feel that this has had a beneficial impact aiding the success of the 2019 Festival. I have thanked Matt for his excellent work for our Festival.

Until we opened for exhibitors to book in for the Festival and before tickets went on sale, few will have known about the cross-discipline ‘behind the scenes’ discussions leading to agreement on changes to be made to processes and systems. Through that team’s hard efforts that included Graham Cossins system design & programming skills we introduced a number of new features such as:

- Exhibitors booking in on-line – initially and for their exhibits

- Various enhancements to the display of the exhibits in the galleries and outside
- Joining as Members (“Friends of the Festival”) on-line
- Members purchasing tickets on-line
- SagePay introduced as an alternative to PayPal on-line

All of these worked very efficiently and proved very beneficial.

2019 Festival

The Festival was set for a week later than normal so that we could use Concord College for our Final Concert on the only date available to us, namely 18th August 2019. This left us slightly concerned as to whether the availability of volunteers and the purchasers of tickets would be available later in August. But we felt that we had a good programme of events to help address at least any loss of normal ticket purchasers. We needn’t have been worried. What a fantastic 2019 Festival in which we achieved:

- More tickets sold for paid events than the last few years
- More attendances at free events and a record number at one event
- A record number of Exhibits
- A record number of visitors to the Exhibition
- Some wonderful comments about the quality of events and the Exhibition and about the organisation of the Festival – not just from attendees but also from performers and exhibitors

The audiences and visitors were challenged to different extents by what they heard and saw but that is the nature of being an Educational Charity. Inevitably such experiences drew some criticisms and disappointments. All of these have been fed back to the Festival Committee and we strive to minimise these whilst still attracting as wide an audience as possible. We must though continue to provide some challenges as well as encourage audiences/attendees to rise to those challenges

The Exhibition provided a fine display by our local Guest Artists Claire Carter, a Landscape & Wildlife Photographer. Local MP Philip Dunne spent a fair proportion of his Exhibition visit admiring her work and purchased a print, too. Claire’s afternoon talk was well attended with a number staying on for more technical discussions. Overall the array of artwork was excellent and the standard rose again. The purchases were again very strong. The number of visits was the highest known. So from all perspectives a wonderful achievement.

The range of music events was wonderfully broad, varied and attractive with different styles (classical, jazz, folk, more contemporary etc.), instrument combinations, ensembles and soloists, singers and dancing in the final event. Audiences were very solid throughout with four sell outs and others very full. We had memorable classical experiences from the Fitzwilliam String Quartet, Ferio Saxophone Quartet with Timothy End, Linos Piano Trio, Heatwave Trio and Bones Apart (trombone quartet) as well as Blazin’ Fiddles (folk), the wonderful singing & music of Jazz at the Movies, classic favourites in a more contemporary style from Classic Rhythm and the wonderful Tango Band, singer and dancers as the finale.

The Drama & Spoken Word events drew larger and more varied audiences than recent years with two complete sell outs and one very close. The Very Grimm Brothers mixture of poetry, music & story-telling left the audience more polarised about their experience than other events whilst “Private Lives” performed by Heartbreak Productions was generally very well received. The talk about the cultural & social history of Wroxeter and the subsequent visit to the site were also well received.

The Festival was again successful financially, as will be covered shortly in Ian’s Treasurer’s Report, with positive contributions from the different elements. This has been fortunate as the Trustees were conscious of the need to further increase the reserves in the Emergency Fund as future overheads are expected to rise despite our efforts to keep costs down. The Emergency Fund is necessary so that liabilities & costs could be met should the Festival have to be cancelled in whole, or substantial part as insurance has so far failed to offer appropriate cover that is an affordable solution over time.

2020 Festival

The dates for the 2020 Festival were established a while ago as 25th July to 8th August 2020 – a return to our normal fortnight – with only Exhibition collections on the morning of Sunday 9th August 2020. A great varied & enticing programme of music events was booked months ago, the “spoken word” events are as good as all now booked, bookings for coffee concerts & organ recitals are underway. The Guest Artist for the Exhibition has also been confirmed. So we are in good basic shape for our 54th Festival. Information can already be found on our Festival website.

2020 and Beyond

For our Festival to continue to thrive going forward, we do need to ensure that we find able recruits to fill important roles on our Festival Committee and other sub-Committees. Also we need generally to maintain the number and expertise of our volunteers. One example here is that the number in our First Aid team has reduced and we need to find people willing to take on such a role and provide some support to help them achieve the required Certification. This is a challenge with the pressures already – and increasing – on volunteering in our community. More hosts are also required to provide accommodation for performers. It is good fun for the hosts and greatly appreciated by the performers who can enjoy a more relaxing intimate & social atmosphere.

Rising costs are inevitable, not just from inflation. Increased publicity costs are anticipated as the use of external expertise is expected to be utilised at some cost.

The trend continues to increase the number, or content of more inclusive Festivals in South Shropshire. Whilst we fill quite a niche in the market we must not be complacent. We need to keep track of major successful developments because, if nothing else, they can impact upon the available monies to spend on our own Festival. But competition does also bring benefits. For example, if such Festivals include one or two performances more related in content to our own Festival, then that could have a beneficial impact. Also we try to tempt people to come to our Festival by creating awareness & interest at other Festivals.

I am sure that you will join me in looking forward to the 54th Festival next year and we hope that there will be many more to come thereafter.

Thank you all for your forbearance whilst I have delivered this Report. I shall be pleased to take any questions.

Alan Stockbridge
31st October 2019