

AGM 2020: CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

[Non-Trustee names have been removed from this document]

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 third year as Chairman and has been unprecedented in respect of external impacts upon the Festival and new actions that have had to be taken. Although a Pandemic had always been expected to occur at some stage, particularly after the SARS and Ebola outbreaks in the last 20 years, Coronavirus occurred very suddenly and spread world-wide extremely quickly. As was the case for so many other events and Festivals, our 2020 Festival could not take place such were the nationwide restrictions imposed by the Government, ending the sequence of 53 consecutive Arts Festivals.

The support of the Festival Committee in such a difficult year has been greatly appreciated. As has also been the support of my wife. My great thanks to you all.

Organisational: Structure & People

As a Registered Charity and for general good order, we continued with essentially the same structure to our operations, ensuring full and open co-ordination between all the elements of our efforts. At the end of the 2019 AGM the Festival Committee consisted of seven Trustees, namely Gloria Carter, Pat Gibson, Kath Stephenson, Roger Stokes, Claire Tocknell, Eleanor Watters and I. In addition, the Festival Committee had three permanent guests. This left us without a Drama Director and a Technical Director and so I assumed temporary responsibility for these roles to ensure that all elements of the Festival were suitably represented in discussion and decision-making. (For the key decisions, only Trustees had voting rights.)

The very effective sub-committee (working groups) approach was maintained - to good effect - with some changes to the people in the groups. An ex-BBC trained engineer agreed to be our Technical Advisor. Together with a pupil from Church Stretton School with good experience of using equipment for School & community events, we had two new people in the technical team. In addition to the working groups, RW again organised our free events and a few others had specific tasks, all of them linking with the (sub-)committees.

At last year's AGM Eleanor Watters took over the role of Treasurer from Ian Davis. Eleanor has brought to the Festival Committee a wealth of relevant experience. She has worked well with the team and whilst maintaining the essence of our accounting operations, she has made some valuable additions as well as a few changes.

On 2nd January 2020 Roger Stokes advised me that he wished to resign as a Trustee. Roger had been Chairman of the Trustees for an eleven-year period and a Trustee for even longer. The Festival Committee expressed in writing their sincere thanks to Roger which included the following paragraph:

"When the Festival Committee met recently, I read out to them your resignation letter. This was duly accepted with much regret and I was asked to write to you on behalf of not only the Festival Committee but also past & present "Friends of the Festival" and all those you have supported & aided in your work for the Arts Festival. Your enthusiasm, commitment and dedication to the Arts Festival

has been very significant over many years and has seen the Arts Festival blossom and develop in many ways, sometimes through troubled times. This would not have been achieved without Margaret's support and her own efforts for which everyone sends their thanks. This has all been achieved in a most personable and friendly manner. Undoubtedly you will be sorely missed."

Our effort to recruit a new Drama Director has not to date been successful. We continue to advertise for this role and hope that we shall be successful very soon to assist with finalising our provisional 2021 programme (more on this later). A general recruitment for Trustees did receive some interest and hopefully we shall have a new Trustee in place in the next few months.

In view of the current status of their current efforts to move away from Church Stretton, we anticipate that in the coming months we will lose the support of Gloria & Richard Carter. They have been very hard-working and long-serving volunteers with Gloria also a Trustee. For well over ten years Gloria has provided a fantastic Membership & Ticketing service, supported by Richard at critical times, ensuring a smooth selling process and that all seating requests are met to the extent that our venues permit. Gloria has also been a very committed Trustee, willing to contribute to discussions in a personable & supportive manner. Richard has organised the advance purchase of wine and hire of glasses, the storage of these items, moving around the supplies and delivering with the support of other volunteers an amazingly fast interval drinks service. Both Gloria & Richard will be hugely missed when they move away.

One or two of our organisers have dropped out in recent months. We have advertised for new volunteers and have been fortunate to find a few new recruits, notably for the Publicity sub- Committee. However, we continue to advertise as we still have some key vacancies to fill as soon as possible to stage any Festival in 2021.

Volunteers, Sponsors, Supporters and Friends of the Festival

Volunteers are also vital to the running and success of our Festivals. With the 2020 Festival cancelled we did not have to call upon the support of our many regular helpers at Festival time, nor seek new helpers to swell the ranks. We hope that many, many past helpers will be available to help us at any future Festivals, together with some new recruits. To those volunteers in the organising teams, I thank every one of them for their time given up and excellent efforts.

Our sponsors have provided generous support over the years which has been much appreciated and a vital source of income. Despite our not seeking sponsorship monies with the 2020 Festival cancelled, I had the pleasure of thanking a few of them for generously sending us monies. We do hope that our sponsors will support us again for any 2021 Festival. We do have a few Donors who also generously paid us monies and we hope they will also support us again. We did not need to approach our supporters who provide other benefits. Let us hope that these businesses survive and can support us again in the future.

The "Friends of the Festival" arrangement offers advanced bookings, price reductions and priority seating at School events. This normally provides a substantial source of our ticket sales and Exhibition visitors - a vital component of our Festival that will doubtless continue. We thank those Friends who generously paid their Membership Fees in 2020 even though the Festival was cancelled.

Cancellation of the 2020 Festival

As March unfolded preparations for the 2020 Festival were more advanced than the previous year, notably for certain publicity items. However, it was evident that the rapid, global spread of Coronavirus was already having a significant impact in the UK with virus cases and related deaths rising quickly. By the time of the UK 'lockdown' on 23rd March it was evident to the Festival Committee that it was very uncertain whether holding the 2020 Festival would be permitted, or even viable. To avoid substantial, potentially irretrievable costs in April and to relieve many involved individuals from having to think about a Festival in such uncertain times, the Festival Committee reluctantly formed the view that the entire 2020 Festival should be cancelled. The Trustees then took the decision to cancel before the end of March.

A comprehensive communication exercise then took place to announce the cancellation, ensuring that all interested parties were advised before a general notice of cancellation was released. The announcement met with disappointment but from the feedback we received, much understanding & support for an early decision.

The booked artistes were advised of the cancellation and that the cancellation clause in their signed contracts permitted us to cancel in certain circumstances, including an epidemic. We also advised them that our intention at that stage was to re-schedule the booked artistes in 2021 and asked if they might be interested. The artistes were very understanding about the early cancellation, none of them challenged our contract wording to try to obtain payment and as good as all of them said that they would, if possible, like to perform at any 2021 Festival we could stage.

Substantial expenditure in April was avoided. Even though we cancelled the Royal Mail contract to deliver 22,500 Brochures to homes in nearby postcodes, a cancellation fee of 50% of the total cost was due. To our surprise this was, fortunately, waived by Royal Mail in the circumstances.

Many "Friends of the Festival" ("Members") continued to pay their 2020 Membership Fee to help defray costs that would still inevitably be incurred. Similarly, a few Sponsors very generously paid us monies, as did a few Donors. At a 'social gathering' of the Festival Committee in August (confirmed by email by non-attendees), in view of the anticipated small surplus for Festival year 2020, it was agreed that we should offer a refund of the Membership Fees, sponsorship monies and donations received. As I write this report, no requests for refunds have been received which is incredibly kind in the circumstances.

Grant for 2021 from Shropshire Council

Using funds provided by the Government, Shropshire Council alerted us in the summer to 'Hospitality & Leisure Small Business Grants' that became available, advising us that such grants were available to Charities. At that stage the Festival Committee were already considering what sort of provisional programme we could consider for 2021. If there was any form of 'social distancing' in place restricting indoor audiences, then we knew ticketed indoor events would not be feasible, however, an outdoor event might be possible. A major problem with outdoor events is the weather and the potential to be left with a huge residual cost if the

event is cancelled, or only a very small audience buys tickets. We have no natural secure outdoor site and there would be additional costs to make the site secure and provide facilities and manpower to operate the site. Thus, we applied to Shropshire Council for a Grant to stage an outdoor event at any 2021 Festival.

I am pleased to advise that our application was successful and we received in September (in our 2021 financial year) a Grant for £5,000. Planning is underway to hold an outdoor evening event on the middle Saturday of any 2021 Festival.

2021 Festival

Without a Festival, 2020 was a very quiet summer and many of us greatly missed having a Festival to run and/or attend. Fortunately, there were some on-line Arts & Culture events available to watch that many enjoyed though they were not the same as live performances and required the use of technology.

The dates for any 2021 Festival were established a while ago as 24th July to 7th August 2021 – our normal fortnight – with only Exhibition collections on the morning of Sunday 8th August 2021. Concord College could not offer a date in this period so as for 2019 all ticketed evening events would be at Church Stretton School or St Laurence's Parish Church.

At this stage there are many uncertainties as to whether or not we shall be able to hold any Festival in 2021. The key issues are:

- Filling vacancies on the organising committees – these are for the all-year work required.
- 'Social distancing' – any restrictions still in place would likely make the indoor ticketed events non-viable and only a mixture of the Exhibition, Free Events and a ticketed Outdoor Event potentially feasible (if restrictions should not be too severe).
- Venues not available – we need our normal venues to be available, operable & affordable taking account of any new restrictions or requirements that come into force.
- Availability of volunteers during any Festival – if any past helpers are not available, we would hope to find new volunteers, as in previous years.
- Insufficient audience demand – this is difficult to predict. We know that many are keen to enjoy live events again but currently we cannot assume the same volume of ticket sales as 2019.

A provisional programme of 2021 Festival events is being prepared with a few gaps still to fill. The intention is to hold a few less events to save some costs in case there is a lower demand for ticket purchases but we are very conscious that we do also have to cover our overhead costs. This is another uncertainty that needs to be sufficiently overcome before we could commit to holding a 2021 Festival.

2021 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. 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. There may be additional costs to meet any additional requirements that arise from the Pandemic and the desire to better protect communal sites and their visitors from future viruses.

Whilst we fill quite a niche in the local entertainment marketplace, we must not be complacent and must be alert to any changing preferences of our audiences. 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. We also need to work with other providers of Arts & Culture events in the community to ensure cohesion and cross-benefits from our different activities at different times.

I am sure that you will join me in hoping that the current uncertainties are overcome such that we can hold a comprehensive 54th Festival next year. Or failing that at least a partial 54th Festival. Thereafter, we would hope that there will be many more Festivals but there are issues to overcome to continue the sequence.

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

Alan Stockbridge
25th October 2020