



Minutes of Annual General Meeting 2023

Held at the Viridor Theatre, SS Great Britain, at 19.30 on Tuesday 20 June

Attendance

Apologies for absence were received from Tim and Joanna Chambers, Philip Clark, Laura and David Demery, James Durie, John Frenkel, Pauline Marson, Susan Otty, Rosemary Thomas and George Wynne Wilson.

1. Opening of meeting.

The meeting was opened by the Right Honourable the Lord Mayor of Bristol, Councillor Paul Goggin, who had kindly accepted the Society's invitation to be its Patron for his term of office. He expressed his pleasure at being able to attend the AGM, and was particularly pleased that it also involved an opportunity to visit the SSGB site and hear, from Chief Exec Matthew Tanner, their ambitious plans for the Albion Dockyard

After formally opening the meeting, he handed over to Simon Birch (Chair of the Society) who chaired the rest of the meeting- beginning by saying that in addition to the agenda as circulated, there would be an Item 10, on Ashton Court Mansion.

2. Minutes of 2022 AGM

These were approved without change.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4. Review of Civic Society activity 2022

An overview of the Society's activities since the start of 2022 was given by the relevant team leaders/convenors.

Better Bristol

This continued to be produced twice yearly. Mike Manson, the editor, thanked the designer, Tracy Annear, and Dave Thomas who organised distribution. Dave Thomas, from the floor, expressed his thanks in turn to the members of his delivery teams. Mike also thanked regular contributors including Gordon Young, Nic Billane, Simon Birch, John Payne and, in particular, Eugene Byrne. But he was always looking for new contributors and he encouraged members to contact him and talk through ideas.

Events

Nic Billane introduced the Events Team: himself, Graham Egarr, Mike Bates and Andrew Buchanan. He went through, with examples, the different sorts of event they organised: talks, both conventional and by Zoom (the latter had been adopted as an expedient during lockdown but had proved so popular that they were continuing); emails containing short video films on local themes (also introduced in lockdown but continuing to be popular); a variety of walks (with thanks to members Gordon Young, Ed Hall and Dave Blackburn, who acted as knowledgeable guides); and visits to places of interest.

Major Sites Group

John Payne, about to step down as co-convenor of the group, said that its main roles were in: 1) responding to development proposals for major sites at the application or (formal or informal) pre-app stages ("major sites" were residential sites of 10+ units or commercial sites of 1000+ sq m); and 2) contributing to planning policies and area based planning frameworks. He gave a number of examples of both (noting that there had been, on 14 June, a zoom presentation on the work of the MSG, available on the website, which covered the ground in more detail). In the period it had made some 30 submissions.

The chair proposed a vote of thanks to John, in view of his long service to the Society, in the MSG and in many other roles; this was warmly endorsed by the meeting.

Transport & Placemaking Group

Alan Morris said that the work of this group resembled that of MSG, and sometimes overlapped. It had been meeting since Jan 2021, always on Zoom, mainly to develop responses to proposals/consultations. Its members included people with relevant expertise or background, and others- the majority- with simply a lay person's interest; he felt the mix worked well, and was keen to recruit more of both.

In addition to responding to consultations, the group tried to educate itself, to widen its knowledge of the issues and keep abreast of current plans and policies. Recently it had decided to look in detail at two themes, bus transport and open/green spaces.

Design Awards Scheme

Simon Birch, who had convened the group, reported that five awards had been made in 2022: The Malthouse, Wilder Street; University of Bristol Humanities Hub, Tyndalls Park Road; Redland Court; Hope Rise, Chalk Road, St George; and The Mount Without (details on the website). The 2023 awards would be announced at the event on 25 July, at The Mount Without; and there were already many good nominations for 2024.

He encouraged more members to join the team, even if only for a year. The work was fun and not arduous, being mainly concentrated in March and April after nominations closed, visiting and assessing the candidates.

Blue Plaques Scheme

Gordon Young, the convenor of the Blue Plaques Panel, reported that 39 plaques had been mounted since the Society took over the scheme in 2015. Covid had had the effect of delaying unveilings- five had been unveiled in 2022/23, but all since Feb 2023. He ran through the five, during which he thanked the members of the panel who had worked on them: Lori Streich, Kate Spreadbury, Graham Egarr and Malcolm Ravenscroft. The plaques had commemorated: Emma Martin, feminist and free-thinker; Hilda Cashmore, founder of the Barton Hill settlement; Canon Gay, vicar of St Georges Brandon Hill; Sergeant Maurice Rogers, who won a posthumous VC at Anzio; and Sir George White, industrialist and philanthropist, founder of the city's tram system, then of Bristol Aviation. (Fuller details of all are on the website.)

Membership

David Giles reported that membership had increased steadily through most of the period, reaching a peak of 614 in October 22, but had since dropped back to 601. But, for comparison, it had been 475 in Jan 2018. He mentioned that he would be stepping down during the year, so the Society was seeking a replacement. He ran through the main elements of the role: welcoming new members and advising potential ones; dealing with renewals for members who pay by cheque or bank transfer; and preparing the addressed envelopes for Better Bristol.

5. Financial report

The Treasurer, John Jones, said that as in previous years he was able to report that the society was in excellent financial health, with funds of nearly £50,000 and a surplus of £6,500. The main cost was Better Bristol; the Design Awards incurred a modest cost; most of the Groups had negligible costs and Events made a small surplus. The Society was in a strong position and had a healthy fighting fund if it needed it.

No questions were raised and the accounts were noted with approval by the meeting.

6. Election of Officers for 2023/24

In accordance with the constitution, all officers stood down, and all presented themselves for re-election. There were no other nominations.

The following were nominated by Kim Hicks and seconded by Stephen Wickham:

Chair: Simon Birch

Treasurer: John Jones

Secretary: Mike Bates

Membership Secretary: David Giles

All were unanimously elected.

7. Election of other Management Team Members

Sue Ellis and Alan Morris, who had previously been elected three years ago, presented themselves for re-election; they were nominated by John Payne and seconded by Alex Dunn.

Both were unanimously elected.

8. Appointment of Honorary Auditor for 2023/24

Brenda McLennan had offered to continue in this role and her appointment was approved by the meeting. The meeting expressed its appreciation of her continuing contribution.

9. Thanks and tributes

The Chair thanked all those members who were “activists”, many of whom were in the room, whose efforts kept the Society going.

He also paid tribute to the Bristol architect Stephen Macfarlane, a long-standing member of the Society, who had died during 2022. An obituary and tribute to him, by Peter Floyd, was in the current (Spring 2023) edition of Better Bristol and it remarked on his long involvement with Ashton Court Mansion, adding that the successful saving of the Mansion would make a most suitable memorial. It was appropriate then that the next item was about the Mansion.

10. Ashton Court Mansion

The Chair recalled the long history of inaction and false starts in the search for a viable future. In May 2023 he had sent the Council a proposal, the essence of which was that the Council would give the Society the opportunity to research and to broker a feasible way forward, in collaboration with a wide range of local interests.

He reported that the Council had replied that day, 20 June, accepting his proposal subject to stipulating a couple of (acceptable) “red lines”; he in turn had stipulated that there should be visible support from the Council. The Civic Society would therefore be working towards a major event in the autumn to publicise the new initiative. He invited anyone with an interest in taking part in the work to get in touch.

There being no further business, the Chair thanked members and the Lord Mayor for attending and closed the AGM.