

Dear Area Chairmen,

I hope that one day we won't feel that we have to start every email with a reference to the virus. In the meantime, please forgive me for saying that I hope you and your loved ones are well.

I wanted to write to you this week, firstly, because it is a new beginning for me as Chairman and Glenys as Vice-Chairman and, secondly, because there is a lot to tell you and to celebrate.

One of the unexpected effects of the pandemic has been that it has forced us to think about communication rather more than we might have in the past. The Chairmen's Zoom meeting which we held a few weeks ago was very helpful in identifying some possible solutions to the issues we face. Since then, a lot of work has been going on behind the scenes to build on some of the ideas we discussed. I am very grateful to David Triggs and Nick Lister, the Chairman and Treasurer at Stratford-upon-Avon, for delving deeply into the intricacies of webinars, digital licences and audio set-ups. This is a developing picture as we learn more about what is possible in the context of different societies' needs and although we don't have a definitive answer to all of the questions yet, we are a long way down the road and very well placed as an Area. It is clearly beneficial if we can remain in touch with our members during this uncertain period, not least because we want them to feel that renewing their membership is worthwhile. More significantly, many of our members may be quite isolated and so anything we can do to maintain their morale will be welcomed.

I know that lots of you have used Mailchimp to circulate newsletters or simply to highlight the digital resources which are available through The Arts Society website. This is a great way to keep your Society ticking over. In addition, you may have held virtual committee meetings using Zoom or other packages. I'm sure that, like me, you have enjoyed the chance to see familiar faces and found that it raised your spirits. Three societies in the West Midlands (Stratford, Birmingham (Day) and Leamington) have gone even further by holding online lectures. We know there is no shortage of ways to enjoy cultural experiences through your computer but there is something very special about bringing your members together for a 'live' event. The response from members has been overwhelmingly positive. We are probably all going to have to embrace new ways of working now that 'normal' conditions are unlikely to return in the near future. Florian will be sending out guidance on these matters next week. In the meantime, in the West Midlands, we are building up a store of knowledge that we hope will be useful to you when you feel ready to develop your communication strategies.

Please don't feel that you are being asked to run before you can walk. For instance, unless your committee is confidently able to host a virtual meeting using something like Zoom, it might be rash to attempt an online lecture. However, it doesn't have to be the chairman who assumes responsibility for digital communication. Now would be a very good time to seek volunteers among your members who may not be on the committee but have some IT knowledge. David Triggs has prepared a very useful first guide to help you think about online lectures when you feel ready to take this on. In some instances, it may be feasible for your society to share an online lecture with a more experienced society. This won't always be possible but we will try hard to facilitate it if you think it will be helpful. It will probably make sense to have another Zoom meeting for chairmen after we have had time to digest Florian's guidance. In the interim, please let me know if there is anything we can do to help you. Please, also let me know if there are things you are trying which might have a broader relevance for other societies.

On another matter, can I thank those societies who have submitted their photographs and text for the '50 Treasures' Book to Carol Austin. The deadline for submission is 21st July but the sooner the better so that Carol and her team can begin to make selections ready for printing. Please do not worry if you can't take a photograph because of the lockdown. It will still be helpful to send the text so that we can see the balance of intended subjects. Hopefully, a photograph can be obtained after 21st July if restrictions are relaxed.

I very much look forward to working with you over the next few years. I am sure that we will come to look back on these uncertain times as a catalyst for positive developments despite the worry and frustration we are currently experiencing.

My very best wishes,

Rob

Rob Hubbleday  
CHAIRMAN

15 May 2020