Chairman's Report 2024/25

At our last AGM, our former Chairman, Terry Byrne, informed you that our relationship with Chapter had, and I quote, "gone backwards". I am afraid to report that this relationship has, most unfortunately, worsened over the last 12 months, despite repeated requests from us to Chapter to work together and support them.

Since November 2023, Chapter has submitted three significant planning applications: one relating to Leaden Hall, one relating to the Tennis Court Car Park and Marsh Close, and one relating to 17 The Close.

The Trustees were delighted to be able to support the application relating to 17 The Close, prepared by Adam Architecture. Where possible, we have also praised work carried out in The Close – most recently, the installation of new hedge slips to fill the gap near the South Canonry.

However, it would be against the Society's objects, and a failure of integrity, to let damaging proposals pass without comment. This has been the case in relation to the car park and Leaden Hall.

On several occasions we have said to the Dean and Kenneth Padley that we are ready and willing to discuss areas on which we disagree, in order to find common ground so that we can support the applications. Our offers have been routinely rejected. In the last 12 months, no member of Chapter has attended our talks, although they are always invited as guests.

This is not what we want. We look at what is being achieved elsewhere, for example at York Minster, where they have determined that working within a masterplan is critical and that everything they do should not just be "good enough" – it should be inspirational, inspiring everyone who sees or uses it.

That is not to say that everything done in York is right for Salisbury, but it offers much to learn from. I was in York last May, and Alex McCallion, who gave the Preservation Society talk at the Guildhall in September 2023, was kind enough to show me around what they had done there. It certainly is inspirational.

Another example is Gloucester Cathedral, where a traffic management plan – something that is always going to be contentious – was successfully developed and implemented with impressive results. The motto adopted in Gloucester during that exercise, "sacred space and common ground", was effective in helping to ensure that the plan was both functional and appropriate to its setting.

There are three main reasons why our relationship with Chapter has come to this.

Two years ago, before any planning applications were submitted, we were informed during an informal meeting that Chapter's decision-making process would always be made in-house, albeit with advice from their chosen, paid professional consultants and advisers.

We were told that the time to comment was after public consultations, which set out the general overall plan, and then after planning applications were submitted, when the detail became available.

We commented at the time that this was likely to lead to a confrontational relationship, because the details of any plan are so important. This meant that any points we raised would inevitably have to be made as objections within the planning process.

We did, in fact, find significant flaws in the detail after Chapter submitted the planning applications relating to the car park and Leaden Hall, where it appears that Chapter has been poorly advised.

The detail of our views is available on the Council's planning portal, but, by way of summary, consideration of both function and sensitivity to setting were sorely lacking.

The latter was the main reason for the Council rejecting the application to make the use of the car park permanent – although we of course support a permanent car park in The Close.

Our attention is now focused on Chapter's planning application for Leaden Hall to be converted into Chapter offices, with various structures of significant scale proposed for the garden.

As we heard in Kate Felus' talk at the Guildhall in February, Leaden Hall's garden is rare both as a garden of its type and period, and as a surviving landscape captured by Constable in his paintings.

Kate's talk contrasts sharply with the view expressed by Chapter's adviser, who claims that the garden painted by Constable has already been lost, leaving nothing left to preserve.

It is because we believe that such a rare garden should be preserved for future generations that we have submitted an application to Historic England for it to be included on their Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest. This should give it some protection from insensitive development.

We are also keen to work with Chapter to find solutions to their office and archive needs. For example, we offered an alternative idea through our

South Side Vision, presented last year, showing how the current works yard could be developed.

Sadly, Chapter would not meet us to consider our vision document, and it went ignored.

Having been ignored, we sought to make our concerns known more widely, in the belief that other people and conservation organisations would see what is being proposed and lend their weight to our efforts to protect The Close, whilst recognising that adaptations to the landscape and buildings are needed in order to secure a sustainable future.

In this, we have succeeded.

This has provoked a hostile response from the Dean, who appears to interpret disagreement as aggression and as evidence that we cannot be seen as a reliable partner.

It sometimes feels as though we have to choose between working for a better relationship with Chapter – which seems to require acquiescence to any of their plans – or continuing to highlight flaws in plans submitted and raising conservation issues as they arise.

The third reason is that we strongly believe that the management of our rare and magnificent Close should be through a Close-wide masterplan, rather than a series of ad hoc decisions.

I say “our” because we, including its owner, Chapter, are all merely custodians of The Close.

The Close will outlast us all by at least centuries, and future generations would look upon us poorly if we did nothing to understand and value its importance, strive to secure its beauty, sustainability, use and function, and ensure its preservation for their enjoyment and pleasure.

Only a masterplan can properly ensure and deliver this.

How our relationship with Chapter will develop from here remains to be seen. However, we remain both ready to engage positively with Chapter and, at the same time, determined to work in the best interests of The Close.

We have been advised that part of the answer lies in the tone and manner in which we speak, and we are always ready to listen to advice on how we could improve that while maintaining our effectiveness.

Our Society has been successful in preventing a car park application that gave insufficient consideration to the landscaping and its setting, and which also presented a pollution risk, as hydrocarbon-polluted rainwater

runoff is currently free to enter the nearby ditch in Rack Close and so into the River Avon.

We hope that Chapter will bring a revised application to the Council and have already offered our help and support in preparing one. Sadly, that offer has been rejected.

We hosted two key events during the last year: the visualisation of what development could be achieved on the south side of The Close, where the works yard is currently located, and a very well-attended and fascinating talk about Leaden Hall's garden by the landscape historian Dr Kate Feluś at the Guildhall.

For those of you who missed Kate's talk, the Georgian Group is hosting a re-run at its London base on 12 June, at 6.00pm for a 6.30pm start. If you are interested in attending that talk, please let us know.

Most of our time has been spent studying the detail of the Tennis Court Car Park/Marsh Close and Leaden Hall planning applications submitted by Chapter, and responding to them.

That has involved learning about conservation and planning law, understanding the corporate governance requirements of Chapter within the Church of England – particularly in light of cathedrals in England coming under the regulatory control of the Charity Commission in 2023 – and developing working relationships with relevant conservation groups, including Historic England, the Georgian Group, the Gardens Trust and, more recently, the Wiltshire Historic Buildings Trust.

We are also embarking on action to ensure that enforcement is properly delivered and will likely have to obtain professional advice on how best to achieve this.

There are three areas where we think action is necessary:

- Pollution risk: The Environment Agency informed the Council that the car park, in its current form, is a pollution risk to the River Avon via the ditch in Rack Close. No response or action from the Council or Chapter has been forthcoming.

- Leaden Hall maintenance: We know from photographs submitted with the planning application, as well as reports from the Georgian Group and others, that lack of maintenance to the Leaden Hall house and garden since it closed as a school in 2016 has led to serious damage. We believe some limited repairs have been carried out to stop further water ingress, but we are not aware of any

repairs to make good the substantial internal damage. The deterioration of the forecourt and gates is evident to any passer-by. Maintenance and repair are quite separate issues from any planning application, as Historic England has pointed out in its submissions to Wiltshire's planners.

- Marsh Close cabinets: Two large green cabinets were installed in Marsh Close without a planning application and therefore, we believe, in contravention of guidance from the Cathedrals Commission for England. Their presence also appears to suggest large-scale events in Marsh Close that may not be appropriate to the semi-rural nature of that area.

All of this has placed a considerable demand on our finances, as we have paid for professional advice to ensure that our approach is in line with planning law and conservation best practice.

We are extremely grateful that some of our members have been most generous with significant donations, as will be outlined by our Treasurer later.

I would like to offer my great thanks to those who donated and to everyone who has supported us over the last year.

Regarding the Board of Trustees, it is with great sadness that we report that our longest-serving fellow Trustee, Dieter Scholz, passed away on 27 February.

More than anyone, Dieter gave his time to the protection and preservation of The Close. Perhaps his greatest legacy is the protection given to The Close by ensuring its inclusion in the recently adopted Salisbury Neighbourhood Plan.

Our Society owes a great debt of gratitude to Dieter's determination and effort over many decades. He is much missed.

Dieter was also our Membership Secretary and managed our website and general IT. My fellow Trustee, Liz Slater, and I have broadly taken over management of the website, and we are fortunate that Simon Murray, a volunteer with a background in IT, has agreed to volunteer his time and manage this for us.

You will see some changes to the website soon, and we are also in the process of improving our membership lists and communications.

Terry has taken over membership matters and will talk about that later.

I regret that I also have to report two retirements from the Board.

First, since the last AGM, Christopher King decided that he wished to stand down.

After his years of service, which included two years as Secretary, his work in relation to the Close Condition Report, his input on environmental matters – particularly on Marsh Close – and his specific expertise on construction, architecture, design and conservation matters were invaluable.

Christopher was able to explain to us what the building specifications set out in Chapter's planning applications would actually look like. His contribution is greatly missed.

Secondly, I have to announce that Nick Bacon has decided to step down as a Trustee from this AGM.

Nick brought Alex McCallion from York to Salisbury in September 2023, when Alex gave a talk at the Guildhall inspiring us with what is possible.

Nick was also instrumental in developing our visualisation of the potential development of the south side of The Close, with the professional help of Alan Baxter and Associates.

Nick is the driving force behind the valuable Close Condition Report and came up with the strapline that accurately sums up what we are about – "excellence in heritage estate management" – which was recently quoted in Chapter's own literature.

His input cannot be overstated.

We are delighted that Nick has said he will continue to support and advise us as a member. I have no doubt that we will be calling on his invaluable services.

I would like to personally thank Nick for his enormous effort, input and contribution to our Society – to how it operates, how it is seen and what it does.

Finally, I would like to give special thanks to Simon Murray, who has helped enormously as we have tried to get to grips with editing our website and our overall IT needs.

I dread to think how we would have fared without his expert help.

Jeremy Edwards

Chairman