Chairman's Report 2025/26

The Society has had another busy year.

The fate of Leaden Hall continues to use up much of our time and energy attending City Council planning meetings, securing press coverage, liaising with experts and contributing to the Save Leaden Hall website.

We regard it as a worthwhile investment because of the importance of Leaden Hall in the history of The Close. The application aims to turn Leaden Hall into Chapter's offices, build an archive in the garden and install 168 9-foot-high solar panels plus heat pumps in the garden.

Over the last 12 months, the planning application has seen multiple amendments which, while not substantially changing the application, have nonetheless had to be examined and responded to. The most recent amendments were submitted by Chapter in January of this year.

As yet, we still don't know when the application will be considered by Wiltshire Council's Southern Area Planning Committee, but it is likely to be within the next few months. Your support at the Committee meeting will be crucial: we shall let you know the date as soon as it is published.

To this end, we have engaged with and received considerable support from organisations such as the Georgian Group, The Gardens Trust, the Walled Kitchen Gardens Network, the Wiltshire Historic Buildings Trust and from relevant professionals such as Dr Kate Feluś, Robin Lane Fox, Timothy Wilcox, the art historian and author of a book on Constable, Anne Lyles, former curator of 18th and 19th Century British Art at the Tate Gallery, and Michael Rosenthal, Professor Emeritus of the History of Art at the University of Warwick and author of two books on Constable.

We object to the applications because:

- They fail to meet the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework, including because:
    - of the harm it will cause to Leaden Hall, when another suitable location – Wyndham House, identified by Canon Robert Titley – is available;
    - the proposed archive is in Flood Zone 3. Building there will put irreplaceable documents at risk. There are alternative locations available, including the Chapter Office which is already used for the archive, is in Flood Zone 2 and will be left vacant if administrative staff move out;

- of the lack of counter-balancing public benefit, except for six spaces for the public in the archive building.

One of our main causes for disappointment has been Wiltshire Council's lack of enforcement.

Historic England has made clear to Wiltshire Council that Leaden Hall should be repaired urgently and separately from the planning application. To our knowledge, Wiltshire has taken no steps to enforce this and Leaden Hall continues to deteriorate. The building is now on the Georgian Group's 'Buildings at Risk' register.

In Spring 2025, Chapter's planning application to make use of the car park permanent was rejected by Wiltshire Council's Southern Area Planning Committee.

To remind you, the reason permission wasn't granted decades ago is because the Council wanted to see a 'traffic management plan' to control and minimise traffic in The Close – something that has never been produced even to this day.

The reason its application was rejected last spring was that the design and appearance of the proposed car park was not appropriate to its setting.

However, the car park continues to be used, despite Chapter's planning application being turned down, and despite the Environment Agency writing that, in its current form, the car park is a pollution risk to the River Avon Site of Special Scientific Interest.

I wrote to Chapter twice in the last 12 months asking if they had plans to start works to prevent the car park being a pollution risk. I was given no indication of planned action, which is very disappointing given the Cathedral's gold Eco Church status.

Another source of disappointment has been Chapter's continuing approach to matters relating to The Close. Instead of inviting us in to discuss our concerns together, Chapter is maintaining its previously stated process where they consider and make decisions behind closed doors, with any concerns to be made in response to their planning applications through the public planning process.

So, instead of engaging with us to find common ground, amendments to Chapter's planning application or Leaden Hall that don't address the problems are made over and over again.

We are disappointed that Historic England decided not to add Leaden Hall's garden to their list of gardens of historical interest.

The grounds still contain the framework of a planned landscape for a smaller Georgian house, as well as a rare inner-city Georgian kitchen garden.

The submission made on our behalf by Dr Kate Feluś was powerful. We will never know why the application for this rare example of a garden of its type in a town or city much painted by Constable was turned down.

There are, however, reasons to be cheerful about the results of our endeavours.

About three years ago, Nico Villeneuve, Christopher King and Nick Bacon went around The Close and put considerable time and effort into producing a detailed report on the condition of The Close.

This Close Condition Report was presented to Chapter and was initially not well received. Months later, Chapter changed its view and came to appreciate the report, with a revised report being produced and presented a year later.

Much of what was presented in that report either has been or is in the process of being addressed.

We also support the ongoing refurbishment of No. 17 and No. 20, where Chapter engaged highly competent contractors with the skills to do an excellent job.

We held a very well-attended talk by Anne Lyles earlier this year at the Guildhall in Salisbury. An ex-curator of 18th and 19th Century British Art at the Tate Gallery of Britain and a specialist on the paintings of Constable and Turner, she gave a most informative talk.

We learned something of the background and details of Constable's life, his friendship with the Archdeacon Fischer who lived in Leaden Hall and the 16 paintings Constable produced while staying at Leaden Hall.

A point she made that remained with me was that Constable only painted scenes that had a meaning to him, such as the garden of his family home, or the areas around the home of his close friend and supporter at Leaden Hall.

We have changed the membership fee in the last year and are trying to streamline membership renewal to take place every January instead of on the anniversary of when members joined.

Most professional help we have sought in the last year has been offered either for free or at much reduced rates, but we have still had to pay for it.

We have also subsidised our events in order to keep prices reasonable. Our new rates are in line with other societies. Our Treasurer will give more information on that in his report to follow.

You are members because you recognise the importance and unique qualities of The Close. The Society's purposes are to support its preservation and to disseminate information about it, which we do largely through responses to planning applications, events and publications.

We would like to do more, including a wider range of activities, but we are constrained by the limited number of Trustees.

Being able to stop being a Trustee is as important as becoming one. We all have changing priorities, so please be aware that if you do offer to become a Trustee then at some point you may need to step down if things change. There is nothing wrong with that at all.

With so few Trustees currently, however, the workload in the last year has built up.

We would be delighted to hear from anyone considering becoming a Trustee, or who knows someone who is interested in becoming one.

I regret to have to report that Terry Byrne has decided it is time to step back from his role as Treasurer of our Society.

I'd like to thank Terry for all his work and his contribution to the Society over the years. I'm delighted that he has agreed to stay on as a Trustee for now.

I knew next to nothing about conservation, and relatively little about The Close, when I was invited to join the Board. I have learned a lot in my time as a Trustee, not least through meeting some fascinating experts in their fields.

We would very much like to establish a more collaborative, constructive relationship with the Cathedral. Our interests should align.

Such a relationship would have enabled us to come to a mutually acceptable compromise over Leaden Hall, saving both energy and money for more positive activities.

In the absence of such a relationship, we have, nevertheless, been supportive of good work – such as the planning applications for 17 and 20 The Close.

We are delighted to see the redecoration of the houses by the High Street Gate.

We contributed funding for the traffic team's box and the report on the hedges of Marsh Close.

We hope that the installation of Neil Traynor as Canon Treasurer will give us all an opportunity to reset the relationship, and I have written to him to invite him to an informal conversation with the Trustees.

Thank you.

Jeremy Edwards

Chairman