

President's Address to the Friends of York Art Gallery Annual General Meeting, Saturday 27th March 2021

It wasn't possible to hold our AGM in March 2020 due to the onset of the Covid pandemic. Since then, zoom technology has been mastered by us and we are thus able to meet and conduct our business virtually. First of all, I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all Friends who are attending this morning. We are enjoying the onset of a lovely spring and we look forward to when our lives will return to normal – or whatever normal turns out to be in the post-pandemic world.

The Gallery has experienced the most testing year of its existence in peacetime conditions. It was closed in March 2020 with the onset of the pandemic, opened in severely restricted conditions, closed again after Christmas and it will remain closed until probably the end of May of this year. This has resulted in greatly reduced funds, which at one stage threatened the very existence of the York Museums Trust. The Friends supported the Gallery in its hour of need with a £6,000 grant, and the Gallery was successful in obtaining grants from the government, the Arts Council and York Council among others. The Trust has had to restructure its governance and staffing, losing 43 members of staff through redundancies out of a total of 144. Such radical changes will inevitably have long term effects on the Gallery. The grants from the government have guaranteed the future of the Gallery but it was a close-run thing. Reyahn King, as Chief Executive, is to be congratulated on a resourceful and spirited campaign on behalf of the Trust as a whole and our ever-cheerful Curator, Beatrice Bertram, deserves our heart-felt thanks for more or less single-handedly keeping the show on the road at the Gallery. They are both speaking to us this morning and I look forward to hearing some more of the details.

During 2019, there were some outstanding shows at the Gallery. *Ruskin, Turner and the Storm Cloud* was an great success, as was *Bouts and the Netherlandish Golden Age*. This last show developed from a loan to the Gallery of *St Luke in his Study* from the Bowes Museum and was very generously supported by loans of some wonderful pictures from the National Gallery. It allowed us at York to display some Netherlandish pictures from our reserve collection and the

Friends helped with the conservation of some of these that had languished in the store for too long. There was also an opportunity to see a major masterpiece, Poussin's *Triumph of Pan*, again through the good offices of the National Gallery. Beatrice put on a show, *Coast to Coast*, of sea pictures largely from the reserve collection, with conservation work paid for by the Friends. The exhibition programme for 2020 was of course severely disrupted but the Harland-Miller show was a cheerful survivor. Beatrice also managed to put on a show of *Views of Yorkshire*, again largely from the reserve collection, with the involvement of Genevieve Stegner-Freitag, the MA student from the University of York, during a relaxation of the lockdown in the summer of 2020. This was once again supported through substantial grants for conservation provided by the Friends. It was accompanied by a show of favourite paintings from the permanent collection entitled *Paintings Chosen by You*, based on a questionnaire of Friends and visitors.

Since our last AGM there has been a major acquisition for the Gallery paid for by the Friends. For many years there had been funding for acquisitions provided by a generous legacy of Dr Bearpark and this was finally largely spent on acquiring a late work by Dame Laura Knight, who has been until now unrepresented in the Gallery. She was a member of the Staithes Group and only the first female to be elected a full Royal Academician since its establishment in 1770.

During 2019 and 2020 the Friends Committee maintained regular meetings, latterly of course via zoom. In lockdown the Committee has met regularly and the website has been restructured under the knowledgeable direction of Anne McLean. There have been regular newsletters edited by Jim Sharpe, the *Art Work of the Month* continues under the guidance of Ron Clayton, Azizah Clayton has continued her work as Treasurer and the Committee has benefitted from the clear leadership of the interim Chair, Charles Martindale. The AGM in March 2020 was abandoned due to lockdown and over this period there have been a number of people who have stepped down from the Committee. Peter Gibbard, having served his full time as Chairman, stepped down in the summer of 2020, having served the Friends over seven years both as Secretary and Chairman with energy and distinction. Among many other things he did a huge job in detailing all the grants and acquisitions

from the Friends to the Gallery since 1948. This involved countless hours poring through the archives and resulted in the 2018 show *70 Years of Giving Art* showing some of the outstanding acquisitions. He found that over 100 acquisitions were made with the help of grants from the Friends totalling more than a quarter of a million pounds. Judith Glover left about the same time having made a major contribution as Secretary. She reorganised the function of Secretary bringing the role up-to-date and greatly improving communications both with the Committee and the membership. To both Peter and Judith we owe a great debt of thanks. We also said goodbye to Linda Downey who, with Dorothy Nott, had supervised our overseas trips and also to Anne Parkinson and Lottie Inch. To all members of the Committee over this period I would like to express heartfelt thanks for their support of the Friends activities in these difficult times. We were fortunate to be able to co-opt Benjamin Hilliam as Secretary and Moira Fulton who is helping to organise events. In addition, we owe a huge debt of thanks to Richard Bailey who has not only managed the Acquisitions Fund and advised the Committee on investments but has also undertaken the onerous task of revising the Friends constitution – the results of which are presented to you at this meeting.

The lockdown of the Gallery and the cancellation of so many events has had its effect on the Friends and we have suffered an inevitable loss of numbers which I hope will right itself once the lockdown is ended. But it is important that numbers are maintained and so many thanks to all those present and all who continue to support the Gallery through their membership. The Gallery is going to be increasingly dependent on funding through private support and philanthropy. So if you know of any of your friends and acquaintances who might be interested in joining the Friends do please encourage them to do so.

Looking ahead, we keenly anticipate a major show of Thomas Gainsborough, one of Britain's very favourite artists, and a raft of other shows which we hope will not be affected by any resurgence of Covid. I applaud a current experiment in charging, whereby admission to the permanent collection will be free and charges will be made for exhibitions. This should result in much larger attendances at the Gallery. We are exploring, as Friends, a collaboration with the Gallery to raise

funds for a refurbishment of the Burton Gallery and the staircase. This is only in its early stages and will have to wait its turn as the Gallery adjusts to the post-Covid world but it would provide a much improved space for the permanent collection and complete the process of the refurbishment of the Gallery as a whole.

A small plug now before I finish; the Friends are going to set up a stand of second-hand art books in the Gallery shop to raise funds for the Gallery and we are inviting donations from Friends and well-wishers. Please contact me personally if you have any books to offer. My contact details are on the Friends website.

Finally, I think I speak on behalf of all present when I say that I fervently look forward to the time when the Gallery reopens. The visual sense is perhaps the strongest of our senses and we have missed the ability to just pop into the Gallery to see the latest exhibition or look in on a favourite artwork very much. The closure the Gallery has brought home to us how much we feel its absence in our lives. So let's hope the present closure is the last and that we will once again be able to enjoy its treasures.

Peter Miller
President of the Friends of York Art Gallery
March 2021