

President's Address to the Friends of York Art Gallery Annual General Meeting, Saturday 25th March 2022

Good morning.

First let me extend a warm welcome to all Friends who are attending this meeting. The miracles of modern zoom technology mean that we can foregather virtually for our AGM but we must fervently look forward to the day when we can meet in reality. It is now two years since the Covid pandemic has changed all our lives, we must hope that this time next year we are back to normal or at least the new normal.

This last two years have undoubtedly been the most difficult in the Gallery's history. At one stage it looked as though the Gallery would run out of funds and although this did not happen, draconian measures were forced on the York Museums Trust who had to announce 46 redundancies. As a result the Gallery is now closed on Monday and Tuesday and only open from 11.00am-4.00pm the rest of the week with visitors having to book before coming.

Amid all this cause for gloom however, the show has gone on and in the last few years we have enjoyed some distinguished exhibitions, notably the Gainsborough show of recently discovered early drawings in 2021-22. I was pleased to see that this was supported by a loan from the National Gallery of Gainsborough's early masterpiece, *Cornard Wood* and note that in a 1927 exhibition at the Gallery of *Old York Views* seven Turner watercolours had been loaned to the show by the National Gallery. I was intrigued to see that Lycett Green was on the Exhibition Committee in those days as twenty-five years later in the 1950's the gift of the Lycett Green Collection would transform the collection of the York Art Gallery.

The Gainsborough show has now given way to a most lively reassessment of the Bloomsbury Group – *Life, Love and Legacy* which is to run until 5th June. This is in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery and Sheffield Museums and is curated in York by Becky Gee.

In all this we must pay tribute to the staff at the Gallery. In very difficult conditions they have dealt with visitors with unfailing courtesy and given

them a warm and friendly welcome. We thank them for making a visit to the Gallery such an enjoyable experience.

Reyahn King as Chief Executive of the Trust has maintained a generous and positive outlook and it is sad news for York that she is to leave in July to become Director of Heritage Properties at the National Trust for Scotland and be based in Edinburgh. She has made a significant contribution to the visual arts while being at York, not least in expanding the exhibition programme to reflect a much wider and more diverse remit and bringing to York non-European art and artefacts. In our post-Brexit world, we are in danger of becoming 'Little Englanders' and the wide frame of reference offered by the exhibition programme at the Gallery has been a useful corrective. So thank you, Reyahn, and all good wishes for your move to Edinburgh. Reyahn's successor will be appointed after July.

Beatrice Bertram, the Curator of the Gallery, is at present on maternity leave. She gave birth to Cassiam Betram Hilliam who weighed in at seven and a half pounds on St Valentine's Day. Both are doing well and we send all best wishes to the whole family. Beatrice will return to the Gallery in early 2023 and her role is being ably filled by Morgan Feeley, who was at the Royal Academy for twenty years.

Meanwhile the Friends Committee has continued to be busy under the energetic chairmanship of Charles Martindale, despite the various restriction, closures and lockdowns over the past year. We have a new Treasurer in Paul McLean who has expertly guided the Friends' investment policies. Anne McLean has continued to oversee and improve the website and Sue Smallpage has managed to slightly increase membership against all the odds so that it presently stands at over 700.

We should also welcome John Roe who is taking over from Benjamin Hilliam as Secretary.

Ron Clayton has maintained the 'Art Work of the Month' through the Newsletter and is happy to announce that from next month it will make a welcome return to its traditional lunchtime 1.00-2.00pm spot in the Gallery. It will continue to present talks on a remarkably wide range of

subjects such as ceramics by Hans Koper and Carol McNicoll, overviews of Bloomsbury and Japonisme and paintings by Etty, Joshua Reynolds, Walter Greaves and Barbara Mackenzie Smith.

The Newsletter itself is ably edited by Jim Sharpe and continues to be a vital connection for the membership with the Gallery.

The Events Subcommittee provides an extremely varied programme for the membership and we look forward to the major evening event on 26th April focusing on the acquisition of *Early Morning in a Gypsy Camp* by Dame Laura Knight. This is the most ambitious acquisition in its history by the Friends for the Gallery and fills a major gap in the Gallery's holdings.

The efforts to refit the Burton Gallery are on hold for the moment but the Committee continues to be keen that this should go ahead.

Before concluding, I should perhaps the success of the Friends bookstall in the Gallery. Thanks to the generous donations of art books by the Friends this has raised well over £3000 for the Gallery since its launch in July 2021. Please do keep the books coming. You can deliver to me at 10 St Oswald's Road, Fulford or I can arrange collection. My contact details can be obtained at the Gallery. Please do not deliver them directly to the Gallery as they have no storage space.

In conclusion I would say the policy of free entry to the Gallery with charges for special exhibitions has been widely welcomed although it is too early to assess the impact it will have on visitor numbers, as they are so restricted at present. After two years of probably the most difficult conditions for the Gallery in its nearly 150 year history, we can look forward to the future with the hopeful expectation that 'things can only get better'.

Thank you.

Peter Miller
President of the Friends of York Art Gallery
March 2022