



Friends of York Art Gallery

**Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held at the York Medical Society Rooms
on Saturday 23rd March 2024 at 10 am**

Apologies were received from David Alexander, Bob Anderton, Rosemary Anderton, Robert Coursey, Lizzie Darbyshire, and Christine Roe

1. The Chair (Charles Martindale) welcomed everyone and declared the meeting open.

2. The minutes of the meeting of Tuesday 21st March 2023 were approved, nem.con.

3. **Peter Miller gave the President's address.** Peter thanked the Medical Society for their generous disposal of their rooms for the meeting. He referred to a number of items contained in the Annual Report (previously circulated to members). 2023 had been a good and varied year with a number of highly successful events. He was pleased at the good relationship between the Friends and the new CEO of YMT Kathryn Blacker. A summary of the address will be circulated. He ended by stressing the need to continue to support the Gallery financially in these troubled times.

4. **Chair's Address.** The Chair began by mentioning the sad death of Jim Sharpe, a distinguished historian and a valued member of the Committee. He then commended Margaret May and Sue Greenhow, both of whom were standing down as members of the Events Committee at the end of this year, for their sterling work. As a result, the Events Committee was desperately in need of new blood. Margaret May has also announced her intention not to seek re-election to the main Friends Committee; the Chair thanked her for her valuable contribution during her period on it. He appealed to the Friends present, and asked them in turn to mention matters to their friends in the hope of gaining new recruits. He thanked members of the committee and various subcommittees for all their work.

There had been a joint colloquium with the University of York on the recently acquired Laura Knight painting, *Early Morning in a Gypsy Camp*, and he was pleased to report growing collaboration between the Friends, the Gallery, and the University's History of Art Dept.

On the pressing matter of finances, he said that, while the Gallery had been compelled to reintroduce admissions charges, the Friends had the benefit of free access, including to exhibitions. In addition, membership gave valuable borrowing rights at the University of York Library.

Subscriptions. There had been no increase for ten years. The Trustees were about to discuss raising it. The Chair made a passionate plea for the cultural life of the nation, and recalled the heroic and inspiring efforts by the former minister Jennie Lee on behalf of the arts in the 1960s. (For a written version of this part of the address see Appendix 1.) As Friends we are benefactors, not just beneficiaries, and so we should dig deeper into our pockets. He concluded by inviting Kathryn Blacker, the CEO of Yorkshire Museums Trust, to speak.

5. Presentation by Kathryn Blacker

Thanks to Charles and Peter for their kind words and introduction and also for support during the time I've been in post. I know they have both painted a rather pessimistic outlook, but I am an eternal optimist and although I have prepared notes to share with you, think it's important to speak for a few moments on the efforts we are making to increase our funding and also to demonstrate our value. I'm working on various initiatives to ensure we are visible and at the front of any queue for funding in future, by managing stakeholders and partners carefully and openly.

As part of the National Museums Directors Council (on which YMT has a seat) and with the English Civic Museums Network I am contributing to initiatives which lobby politicians, both those in cabinet and those in the shadow cabinet on the value of the Museums sector, and the fragility of the local authority funded network. One only has to look at the news to see how bleak the situation is in say for instance, Nottingham, Birmingham or Suffolk. As a group we have contributed to Arts Council England (ACE) research on the downturn in local authority funding for the arts and culture since 2015. We are also hosting a session in the House of Parliament in early May to lobby MPs about the impact and value of regional and civic Museums.

Closer to home, I am working closely with the other six York ACE National Portfolio Organisations (NPO's) National Centre for Early Music, Next Door But One, York Explore, Pilot Theatre, York Theatre Royal and Mediale, to ensure we are as closely networked and linked as possible. This also extends beyond the NPO network and I am working closely with other cultural providers, NRM, York Minster, York Archaeology, Civic Trust, York Conservation Trust and both universities to ensure all our partners understand our value and can advocate for us.

Finally, in advance of the mayoral election this May and in recognition of the leverage they will have to raise income I am working closely to ensure the Culture and Archives team in North Yorkshire County Council, know who we are, know about our cultural vision and ambition and are engaged in our development plan. I'm also working closely with colleagues at CYC albeit they don't have a dedicated culture/arts officer to ensure they are aligned with our plans and thinking.

None of this secures income, but goes some distance to ensuring YMT is an integral part of any future vision of York and North Yorkshire for residents and visitors alike.

To what I'd originally planned to say.

Since we last briefed the Committee with a new leadership team and with the support of our Board we have clarified our purpose and priorities and stated our values as detailed below.

Our Vision

Connecting and inspiring people with the stories, history, art and culture of York and North Yorkshire.

Our Mission

Championing curiosity, inspiring creativity and creating opportunities for people to flourish as we collaborate to tell stories about our collections and places.

Our Values

- We value curiosity, creativity, generosity and responsibility equally and together.
- We are curious - We ask questions, we don't assume, we learn and we encourage different perspectives to be heard.
- We are creative - We have fun being creative, driving positive change and exploring potential.
- We are generous - We care for people, collections and places inviting everyone to develop knowledge, to take delight in and enjoy our spaces.
- We are responsible - We make informed decisions today for a better tomorrow and for a sustainable future.
- We are supportive - We collaborate and seek connection to grow a thriving community where we celebrate one another, cheer on progress and are heartfelt with feedback.

Priorities

Building and sustaining a flourishing organisation by:

- Delivering innovative public programming supporting an audience-focused, inclusive, visitor-first approach;
- Driving visitor income, meeting and exceeding enterprise and fundraising targets, managing expenditure;
- Identifying, developing and delivering a Masterplan and associated capital projects;
- Investing in our people ensuring we recruit, retain and develop a high performing team which celebrates diverse experiences and voices.
- Tackling climate change, understanding our carbon footprint and making incremental changes towards a net-zero future.
- Raising our profile through cultural leadership and partnerships working locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

We have had a difficult year **at York Castle Museum**. The discovery of RAAC in the roof of the Female prison required us to close to the public in late September 2023 and we were only able to reopen in mid-December once the problem had been fully identified and repairs made within the planning constraints of a listed building.

The Female Prison is the venue for Kirkgate which is our major visitor attraction. We had to drop our prices in this period and we had much lower visitor numbers which impacted our retail and catering on site. Whilst we were able to reopen with our full *Christmas at York Castle Museum* offer we were not able to market this fully because of the need to have completed the repairs and having reopened on 8 December we had already foregone the first three weeks of our planned Christmas season. The lost revenue from this closure was c. £400k. In addition, YMT have had to find from our reserves the unplanned remedial works costs of over £80k. Unfortunately, we have still not been able to reopen the upper half of the Female Prison because of the need to mitigate remaining RAAC issues. We have quotes for

the necessary works and are talking to CYC directors as to the extent of funding CYC can provide for these repairs. Surveys have also highlighted the urgent need to replace or overhaul the roof covering of the Female Prison to protect the RAAC, the building and collections and safety of our visitors and staff in the short term. Again, we have done the work to understand the cost of this work.

In addition to our permanent exhibitions, we collaborated with York Travellers Trust for an exhibition at the castle: *Celebrating York's Gypsy and Traveller Heritage*.

At the **Yorkshire Museum** we created a new exhibition for the summer of 2023: *Mary Anning Rocks!* celebrating the work of the renowned palaeontologist. And earlier this week *Star Carr: Life After The Ice*, exploring the human ingenuity and creativity of the residents of Star Carr who lived 11,000 years ago. The exhibition is a vital partnership with the Archaeology Department at the University of York, the exhibition showcases world-class objects and features ground-breaking research.

We took the decision in 2020 to reopen in the summer with free admissions to our permanent collections at **York Art Gallery** and to see what we could achieve through visitor donations. These results were disappointing with little or no donations being made despite extensive prompts. Given our precarious financial position we reinstated charging for general admission on 1 February 2024. We have run a number of exhibitions in the year: *marvellous and Mischievous – Literature's young rebels; Bloom;* and *Drawing Attention - emerging artists in dialogue*.

We are hugely excited about the work Bea has been leading to prepare our forthcoming exhibition National Treasures, Monet in York, and the programme she and her team developed for the future, and are looking forward to the Friends preview on the morning of Friday 10th May. We have been able to secure additional sponsorship for the exhibition from JM Finn, and the Friends' support of new lighting in the Burton Gallery was one of the clear levers for me in securing that funding with JM Finn. So, thank you for that ongoing support. I will leave Bea to talk to the full programme as I know she has time on the agenda too.

We are incredibly grateful to the Friends for their support for the funding for new lights for the Burton Gallery – these will be installed in late April at the same time as we redecorate the staircase.

We remain loss-making given our reliance on visitor income and trading through our Enterprise subsidiary for 70% of our funding. We had set a budget loss of £0.3m for 2023/24. Because of RAAC issues we amended our outturn to a loss of £0.7m during the year. Because we have traded well, when we've been able to open, the outturn is expected to be nearer the original £0.3m loss. Demonstrating had we not had the closure we would likely have broken even. Our business model remains stretched and over-reliant on the funds we generate ourselves, though given the visitors we are expecting in 2023/24 we are able to demonstrate that our attractions generate £19M to the City.

Mindful of this our business plan for 24/25 includes capacity for exploring a Masterplan for our estate and for feasibility work on different business models.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak and am happy to take questions.

Following applause for KB, Dorothy Nott mentioned the Collection fund as a viable way of making contributions.

6. Election of Officers and Members to the Executive Committee

The following Officers were elected by the membership at the meeting:

- Treasurer – Paul McLean (prop. Sue Smallpage, sec. Anne McLean)
- Membership Secretary – Sue Smallpage (prop. Anne McLean, sec. Charles Martindale)

The following members of the Committee were elected by the membership at the meeting:

- Charles Martindale (prop. Anne McLean, sec. Moira Fulton)
- Moira Fulton (prop. Anne McLean, sec. Charles Martindale)
- Azizah Clayton (prop. Paul McLean, sec. Charles Martindale)
- Benjamin Hilliam (prop. Sue Smallpage, sec. Anne McLean)

7. Treasurer's Report by Paul McLean

The accounts for 2023 had been approved by HPH and the Committee, and had been circulated to members. The treasurer highlighted the large contribution from events during the year and said that the current year was not likely to prove as fruitful. Grants had been made for the conservation of pictures for the coming Monet exhibition and the restoration of the fifteenth century Nuremburg panel which was unexpectedly returned in 2023 after its theft in 1979.

Tony May questioned whether too much money was being held in reserves (£3 in every £10 of income has been placed in reserves in 2023). The Treasurer pointed out that the cost of the lighting improvements in the Burton Gallery is approximately £30,000. The Chairman emphasised that future capital projects or major acquisitions would cost a significant amount. He said that £250,000 (reserves) would not buy much in terms of paintings, given today's prices. Kathryn Blacker endorsed his comments. Lighting, refurbishing, and related works will take their toll.

Appointment of External Examiners

The Independent Examiner (HPH Accountants LLP) was appointed for a further year (by a show of hands).

8. AOB

Peter Miller thanked Friends for supporting the book stall at the Gallery which has now raised £12,500. Copies of John Ingamells's booklet about Hans Hess are now available on the stall.

Charles Martindale invited Friends to comment on the suggestion that subscriptions need to be raised. The room voted unanimously in favour. Charles also asked whether Friends favoured the AGM being held in person or on Zoom. John Roe pointed to the difficulty of taking minutes on Zoom when, for example, a screen temporarily froze. Overwhelmingly, all but 3 voted in favour of the in-person format (this was an indicative vote). The option of recording or holding hybrid Zoom/in-person meetings was discussed, but would depend on technology and volunteers available.

9. Senior Curator's Report

Beatrice Bertram reviewed the year in the gallery, and spoke of the various exciting exhibitions that had been held, as well as looking forward to events that were being planned. Most of the talks and events she referred to can be found more fully detailed in her piece in the Annual Report. In addition, she mentioned the 1530 panel of Balthazar (one of the Magi) recently donated by a Friend. Like other speakers, she referred to the subject of the stairwell lighting, and showed images of the project envisaged. She ended by thanking the Friends for their considerable support of the Gallery.

10. Presentation by Danae Browne, FYAG Research Scholar University of York

Danae expressed her gratitude to the Friends for their support of her research, and also thanked her tutors in History of Art for their help and encouragement. She was highly impressed by the Gallery space. She is curating a section of a wall for a forthcoming exhibition. The focus of Danae's dissertation will be on the climate crisis, and she has discovered some interesting artworks at the Gallery, particularly abstracts evocative of wartime experience. The body and displacement are among her chief themes.

The meeting ended at 11.38. The Chair then invited all present to a drinks reception.

Appendix 1

I am not sure that there is sufficient awareness in the country of the current threat to our collective cultural life, greater in my view than at any time in my adult experience. Almost all the things I personally care most about are under serious threat: ballet; opera – think what has happened to English National Opera; music – cuts in all the BBC orchestras, a potential existential threat to the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra; theatre; museums and galleries; even universities, from which so much of our culture emanates. The reason is the same in every case: constant cuts in funding, both at local and national level, which are now reaching a tipping point. All over the country local authorities are cutting support for the arts to little or, in some cases like Birmingham, to nothing. In 1904 a German critic, rather unfairly, called Britain 'the land without music'. Does the UK of the 2020s really want to become the land without culture, in stark contrast to most of our European neighbours? But, some-one may say, that may happen in Birmingham or Nottingham but surely not in York. I think we shouldn't be too confident about that. For the moment Arts Council England continues to support YMT, though at a reduced rate, but what if at some future time it drastically reduces that support or removes it altogether? Meanwhile the University contemplates relinquishing its role of looking after the King's Manor, the second most important historic building in York after the Minster, and the City Council likewise with the Mansion House, another great signature building for the City. The reason is the same in both cases: the cost involved is greater than those institutions think they can afford in current reduced circumstances. But what then will happen to these great buildings - where will it all end? The ominous talk in Birmingham is of the City selling off its heritage assets to pay its debts - Its world-famous Gallery perhaps?

This all seems a long way from the 1960s when I was young, and Jennie Lee Britain's first Minister for the Arts, who established the Open University and the Arts Council, and gave her support to the National Theatre. People sometimes say that, while healthcare, social care,

rubbish collections are necessities, the arts are a luxury. Lee disagreed: I quote ‘In any civilised community the arts and associated amenities, serious or comic, light or demanding, musty occupy a central place. Their enjoyment should not be regarded as remote from everyday life’. It is a mistake to set one set of concerns against another: there are civilised societies and there are societies that are not civilised. We have to choose. For Lee nothing but the best would do. Of the Open University she said: ‘There it is, a great independent university which does not insult any man or woman whatever their background by offering them the second best. Nothing but the best is good enough’.

Well! the Friends on their own cannot save York Art Gallery. But what we can do is to support it to the hilt in every way possible, with imagination, with flexibility, with commitment, in line with our charitable aims. That’s what friends do, and that is what, in my view, we should be doing on an even bigger scale than in the past in the very challenging times that lie ahead. And for that we require funds and those of us who can will need to dig deeper into our pockets. We should remember that we are at heart a charity, and to revive to the full our local commitment to the collective good. We have in our forbears from the last century – people like Eric Milner-White, Dean of York Minster, or J. B. Morrell, twice Major of the City – exemplars who through voluntary societies like ours devoted themselves to the cultural life of our great City and its overall flourishing. We need to live up to their example and do the equivalent today.