

The future of the Society
Introduced by Ruth Allington, President designate
9th Feb 2022 at the University Women's Club

Ruth began by saying that she had been a member of the UWC since 1996 and so the Group was in a very real sense, enjoying the comforts of her own Drawing Room!

There appeared to be three key issues facing the Society: Burlington House (BH), the pandemic and the four strategic objectives, as determined by Council in 2020.

To begin with BH, can we afford to remain there? Along with the other courtyard societies, the Society is engaging with the landlord (Dept of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Intergovernmental Relations, led by Michael Gove). It had also been working hard to identify what other locations were possible.

The pandemic has had a profound impact on both the staff and membership, not all negative of course; for example, the total attendance of the public lectures in 2019 was 1,500, whereas in 2020 the number was 32,000 with virtual attendees from all around the world. Everyone has contributed to this success amid a serious cost-cutting environment and there have been many adaptations. During this period, Council established in 2020, a clear statement of strategic objectives which now underpin the budget and business plan, and the agendas of its committees.

Discussion

Q. Does anyone know what Minister Gove intends?

A. Not yet. But it was interesting to note the remarks from Greg Clark MP (Chairman of the Science and Technology Select Committee since 2020) who seems to have injected some reality into the debate about the future of the learned societies. However, it is clear that the rate of increase of rent is such that the Society will inevitably reach a point when it can no longer afford to remain in Mayfair. The full cost of operating BH (rates, maintenance, insurance, service charges, facilities manager, receptionist, other staff costs etc) in 2021 was £675,000, of which the rent was only a third.

Q. Can the Society continue with such high operating costs simply to remain in BH?

A. While the building has enormous sentimental and historic significance to members, this does not necessarily relate to the Society's strategic objectives, especially as the bulk of its income depends entirely on the disposable income of individuals. The inevitable follow-on question is whether the fellowship regards this as acceptable or whether the Society could achieve better value for money elsewhere than Piccadilly?

Q. At first glance, these figures are dazzling, but the serious question is what have we got out of them? Has the zeal of the membership been enhanced? Have we gained more members? What were the impacts of the presentations?

A. The data do at least say that the Society had a much greater impact with the public which is a key object within our charitable status, and supports the second of the strategic objectives.

Q. What could the Society afford in another building?

A. The scope of the Relocation Options Working Party (WP) is to look ahead on a 50-year timescale. To start with, it looked at seven comparable societies and how and where they operated; in fact, they were all based in London. The WP also consulted a commercial estate agent which provided suggestions for modern buildings outside Mayfair or Westminster but still within London. The WP's unanimous conclusion was a clear understanding that the Society needed a building within London which was flexible and could be varied according to changing circumstances and varying demand.

Q. Was any special consideration given to the library?

A. The library occupies about 50% of BH space, including the lower library and it also has 30,000 maps (copyright law means these cannot be digitised). By comparison, other societies have more or less become completely digital and consequently have a much lower 'footprint' and much lower cost for their headquarters.

For a comparison, the Alpine Club, founded in 1857, was the first such club in the world, is also a charitable trust and used to be based in Mayfair; but just over 30 years ago (1991) it had been faced with similar issues in that its premises were unaffordable. The decision it made was to purchase its own premises, a 5-storey ex-warehouse in East London near Old Street station. Since then, it has flourished, retained its physical library and members have no difficulty in attending meetings. (It even has a bunk room, appropriately!). The value of the property has since risen dramatically and there is no doubt that it was the right decision to move out of central London.

The speaker also felt that this evening was a highly commendable demonstration of what the Discussion Group should be doing, holding a debate on key issues and bringing together some wise heads. It was always intended that it should become a focus for discussion on important issues facing the profession, including how we project our messages out to Parliament and other decision makers in society. And that is why we need to stay in the London area.

One suggestion that had been discussed by the WP was to collaborate with another organisation that was also downsizing, but it was concluded that this would undoubtedly result in losing our identity.

It was clear that many people involved in these discussions had said that they used to think in a certain way, but as a result of the investigations conducted, now thought in a different way, which was refreshing.

It was also becoming obvious that while older members had a great nostalgia for BH, this was not shared by the younger generation and so, thinking ahead, the fact is that there is a decline in the number of people applying for geoscience degrees all around the world, and so the Society really must be defined by what it does, not by the building it occupies. In particular, we need to ensure that geoscience degrees are an attractive proposition for students and a great choice for a future career, so that the Society can survive and be more relevant.

We were reminded that no organisation has a right to exist tomorrow! We have to be attractive to future generations because things change. We are spending a great deal simply to remain in the building, which inevitably means that we are not able to spend as much as needed on promotion of the importance of our science to future students and decision makers.

The library review published some years ago in Geoscientist is relevant here and perhaps should be re-read - the concise version is here:

([https://www.geolsoc.org.uk/~media/shared/documents/library/Library%20Review/GEOLOGICAL%20SOCIETY%202020%20LIBRARY%20REVIEW%20REPORT%20TO%20FELLOWS%20-%20CONCISE%20VERSION%20\(1\).pdf?la=en](https://www.geolsoc.org.uk/~media/shared/documents/library/Library%20Review/GEOLOGICAL%20SOCIETY%202020%20LIBRARY%20REVIEW%20REPORT%20TO%20FELLOWS%20-%20CONCISE%20VERSION%20(1).pdf?la=en))

But in short, the review established beyond doubt that only a tiny proportion of the membership actually uses the library in a physical sense, particularly as our own journals and many others besides are available online. And it is possible to make the library even more accessible to knowledge as high-class commercial storage facilities are the norm now. It's about how to manage the library in the widest sense. The British Library, for example, makes use of an old airfield for a large part of its vast collection.

One member confirmed that he had been to several other learned society buildings and found them soulless, unwelcoming - there were some truly terrible buildings! It was very important for the Society to obtain a very welcoming building. Others confirmed that they had been to some very unwelcoming society buildings in central London, which said a lot about the culture and outlook by the organisation itself.

The Group was reminded that not only were the regional groups thriving and running their own events outside London, but since the pandemic, many events that previously based in BH which required registration and were expensive, had largely been replaced by online events which members could dip into easily according to their interests and did not require travel and inconvenience, and had also attracted sometimes thousands of people worldwide to a single event. This transformation to free virtual attendance had been most welcome and provided a valuable promotional route to the geological world's view of the present-day challenges.

As the event drew to a close, it was clear that there was a consensus of the benefits to the Society of moving to a more modern building, still within London, that would make much more efficient use of its resources, focus on its strategic plans for the future and be a much more relevant and attractive place for future generations.

The Chairman thanked all those who had attended and contributed to a most valuable discussion.

John Bennett