

JOHN INNES SOCIETY ANNUAL REPORT FOR YEAR ENDING 31ST December 2023.

Financial Situation

The Society's finances continue to be healthy. Total income from all sources more than covered our costs of running the Society and of our activities described elsewhere in this report. Our chief sources of income are members' subscriptions with associated Gift Aid, together with proceeds from events like plant sales and the Bridge group. The John Innes Centre continues to give us an annual donation and this year they kindly increased their donation to £600. We are also receiving higher levels of interest on our reserves after several years with minimal interest.

Our largest running costs relate to the Coach House in Melrose Road which we lease from London Borough of Merton. Many costs obviously rise with inflation; for example, our electricity charges have nearly doubled. This year we also had to arrange for an inspection of the electrical installation which then required some remedial works, at a total spend of £1,620. Better news was that our regular insurance company, Zurich Insurance, reviewed their policy on premiums and we were very pleased to be offered the same cover as in previous years but at a significantly lower premium of £382, as compared with £1,728 in 2022.

For many years we have held most of our longer-term funds with Virgin Money in a charity deposit account. This year we decided to move half of these funds from Virgin Money to CCLA Investment Management, who specialise in investing on behalf of Churches, Charities and Local Authorities. This is bringing us a greater level of interest while still at a comparatively low level of risk.

Membership

Our membership numbers fell slightly by around 2.5% to 385 subscribers covering 681 members. The decrease is mainly due to new members not compensated by deceased members, many of them long-standing, or those moving out of the area. Where we know of new residents, we put a welcome pack in their mail box to encourage them to join and hope that members with neighbours who are new to the area will mention the society to them and refer them to the website or contact the membership secretary. We are of course particularly keen to attract younger residents.

Events

The annual Spring Plant Sale was very successful but the Autumn Bring and Buy sale was replaced by a coffee morning and an ever-popular cake stall in the Coach House. The AGM in April was again well attended and followed by a talk on heat pumps. We revived our Music in the Park event on one of the hottest days of the year and despite a disappointing take-up, everyone enjoyed hearing a new orchestra. We held a book launch for the latest publication by one of our members. We enjoyed an in-depth talk on The Gothic Revival from a local speaker. The annual Discovery Day at Morden Library was very busy and profitable for us. We finished the year with a short reception to thank all our volunteers for their input.

Planning

2023 was a year when people tried to catch up with their lives and plans which had been on hold during the Covid pandemic. There were a number of over-ambitious proposals to extend homes which would have had an adverse impact not only on the character of the area but also on the amenities of their neighbours. We supported neighbours in lodging objections and although some plans were approved, quite a few were refused by the Council planners. It was gratifying to see most of the refusals were also turned down on Appeal.

We commented on major developments proposed for The White Hart site on Kingston Road, the Wimbledon Chase Station site and a hotel proposed for 18-22 Crown Lane in Morden. Quite apart from damage to local character, we are also concerned how often developers and Council planners, in their push to provide more units of accommodation, fail to take into consideration living

conditions for future occupiers. Many of the flats at Wimbledon Chase, and some of the student rooms at the former White Hart, will have very unsatisfactory outlooks and at the White Hart site, noise and poor air quality from being on a congested main road junction. Both these sites now have planning approval, despite their shortcomings.

Everyone wants good mobile phone connectivity, but we joined with others in successfully objecting to a new monopole tower mast on Morden Road, which would have been right beside the bedrooms of the adjacent home. There are many masts in the area already, and providers should be encouraged to share them for additional equipment, rather than looking for more new sites.

Area Embellishment

The committee was given a presentation by the Friends of Kendor Gardens, regarding their aims and objectives which will enable us to budget better for them. Merton Council's tree officer took a few committee members around part of the area to discuss their procedures and planting schedules and assured us of a successful liaison regarding reporting tree damage and neglect. But we are still concerned at the state and loss of many street trees and actively encourage residents to care for them. The Muslim Women's Group working in Mostyn Gardens was invited to meet the Mayor. The very active Friends' Group in the John Innes Park undertook considerable new planting and keep the committee up to date with their activities and plans. Green Flag status was achieved again in 2023.

Newsletter

We were grateful to our newsletter editor for agreeing to continue for the time being despite having moved away from the area, and it was decided to make the frequency flexible in order to accommodate reports on major events. One of our regular contributors chose to stand down due to so many other commitments, but a successor quickly came forward.

Heritage

We sadly lost a long-standing member who had contributed to most of our publications but whose extensive archive of local history was generously donated to us and has already proved most useful. We updated our contribution to the Council's Heritage Strategy twice during the year but still await action on the bandstand roof and ancient walls. A long-awaited biography of Henry Goodall Quartermain, John Innes' architect, was written by a member and published by the Society. A revised and enlarged version of our Heritage Walk was prepared. We contributed to two revisions of the London Borough of Merton's Heritage Strategy by identifying areas needing restoration or repair and reporting on successful activities to upgrade green spaces.

Publicity and Promotion

The website is frequently updated and is crucial for advertising events, enabling payments for membership and publications and as an introduction to the area for new members. Access to it is monitored and reported. Our Coach House window is decorated with artwork to support major events and in particular with a spectacular display for Christmas.

Other Organisations

We continue to support the Independent Merton Green Spaces Forum as a means of communication with the Council's representatives and other Friends' Groups. We are also members of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the London Forum which provides invaluable updates on planning and legislation.

As ever, our thanks go out to all our willing and long-standing volunteers.