

Chairman's Report 2019-20

The trustees who are:

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Objectives and aims

The Society works to preserve and enhance the buildings, landscape and coastline of Suffolk. It continues to pursue this key aim by making professional informed representations on planning applications arising anywhere in the county where, in the opinion of the society's professionally qualified planning officers, those developments would harm the interests the society seeks to protect. This work is critical in preserving the best of the county's common inheritance for the benefit of all.

Review of activities

2019 was an important year for the society, being the 90th anniversary of the society's foundation. The trustees considered that it was important to mark this occasion with a programme of activities that highlighted the value to the county of the society's work. A centrepiece of this programme was the production of a "Manifesto" to record some of the work done, to assess the effects of that work and its benefit to all in the county, and to set out an ambitious programme of future work to take forward the society's ambitions.

This manifesto was formally launched at a celebratory party generously given on Thursday 27 June 2019 by the society's President, Mr Geoffrey Probert, at his remarkable house and garden, Great Bevills which appropriately is one of the oldest continually occupied houses in the county. An excellent turnout of members and friends of the Society was present, together with many people representing important bodies in the county, and they heard an address by the society's chairman Mr Andrew Fane, introduced by the host and President, explaining the society's work and ambitions and setting that in the context of the Manifesto.

Responses following the event from many of those present made clear their appreciation of the occasion and recognition of the society's contribution to the wellbeing of the county and its built and natural environment. The Manifesto which was prepared by the society's own professional staff has been widely acclaimed as adding understanding and ambition to the society's charitable purposes. Both the manifesto and the party were generously sponsored and did not constitute a charge to the society's funds. In the same period the society's staff oversaw the upgrade of the website which has become much more informative and user friendly.

Routine planning activities

The principal planning activity during the year was the evolving consultations over the “energy coast” proposals with SPR and their vast substations intended for Friston to be followed by EDF and Sizewell C. Jointly and taken with further very large energy developments planned to follow over the next decade the quiet agricultural plain between Leiston, Snape and Saxmundham could become one of the largest development sites in the south of England and its nature will change to one of massive looming industrial structures. Their creation will take well over ten years of relentless heavy traffic on a 19th century highway network with devastating consequences for villages and road users all along the route. SPS has invested a huge amount of skill and effort in the year to studying the submissions and making very detailed planning responses in objection to them. The society has also worked closely with a number of local organisations and supported them in their campaigns to resist these developments. The professional submissions made by the society are to be found on the website.

Routine planning work has not relented during the year and has placed a heavy load on the professional staff who have nonetheless managed to sustain their response rate. In April the society reviewed the budget and increased the hours of remunerated work by the staff and this greatly helped to spread the pressure.

The society operates with a small paid staff and is heavily reliant on the support of its trustees. The routine work of the society continues to be responding to planning applications across the county that would impact adversely on historical or landscape assets of real value. Representations made incorporate professional planning analysis on material considerations where proposals are unsustainable, or cause damage to the landscape or heritage of the location. The society strives to raise the standard of design of new housing and setting that will ultimately lead to better places to live that will integrate with their host settlements. The society continues to support Neighbourhood Plans by which communities can exert influence over the changes to their localities. The society responds to national and local policy consultations. At all times the focus is on preserving the best built and natural heritage of the county - its primary objective.

The society seeks to be an opinion shaper in matters of heritage and planning, and the bi-annual publication Suffolk View showcases the society’s work together with opinion and examples of best practice, which serve to inform stakeholders and attract new audiences. Outreach is developed by alternative media channels to address new audiences. The role of professional commentator with supporting analysis on highly relevant planning matters is translating into growing influence in the field. This can be evidenced by increasing engagement with statutory consultees, planning authorities, amenity societies and single-issue campaign groups, and higher participation by them in training, conferences and debates run by the society.

In addition, the society is providing relevant planning and heritage training sessions for Parish Councils, Amenity Societies and Local Authority members. Media engagement raises the profile of planning campaigns to the wider public. Events are an important part of the offer aimed at promoting the heritage through lectures with private visits for members to sites of special interest often not open to the public. Increasing the membership through such schemes helps to give the society a greater mandate for their campaigning work.

As well as direct individual memberships the society seeks corporate membership from Parish Councils and Amenity Societies. This contributes to the financial strength of the society which remains robust. This has enabled an increase in days of work for our

professional staff, together with enhanced remuneration in the current year. Taken with further fund raising the society has a strong balance sheet enabling it to fund these additional levels of activity, together with selective use of professional consultants to augment the range of the society's expertise. The level of financial support within the county is testament to the regard in which the society is held.

This report confirms that the society is growing in reach and range advancing its key objective of preserving the best of the county for future generations to appreciate and enjoy. The battle remains to sustain design and build quality and appropriate locations for the large number of new houses that national policy calls for. This will remain the principal challenge for the society in years ahead.