

The Wokingham Society Open Evening Wednesday, September 21st, 2011

Members of the Wokingham Society and interested members of the public gathered on Wednesday in the Methodist Church Hall to listen to a presentation by members of the Wokingham Cultural Partnership on the theme of *Artful Collaboration: Culture and Arts in Wokingham*.

Peter Must, Chairman of the Society, reported briefly on the current activities being undertaken by the Society and emphasised the need for co-operation between all local organisations concerned with and involved in preserving the cultural heritage of Wokingham.

He expressed the regret and sadness felt by the Society at the recent fire in The Elms, but he advised that, although the Elizabethan interior had been irretrievably damaged, the developer had assured him that the building would be restored sensitively and appropriately, preserving as many of the Georgian and Regency architectural features as possible.

The Society's Committee had submitted responses to the recent Wokingham town centre regeneration Exhibition, and to the second consultation on plans for extensive housing developments in North and South Wokingham: copies of these had been placed on the Society's website.

The award of Blue Plaques to buildings of historical or architectural significance was continuing, with Tudor House and Montague House to receive plaques shortly.

The Chairman then turned to the main event of the evening and introduced Gwynneth Hewetson, Chair of the Wokingham Cultural Partnership and the Wokingham Town Council Arts and Cultural Committee, who was accompanied by two trustees of the Cultural Partnership, David McLuckie and Nigel Griffiths.

Mrs Hewetson gave a brief history of the Partnership saying that as Chair she had presided over many cultural events, believing passionately that Art and Culture bring the community together. She said that the Partnership's main role is as a facilitator, helping people to realize their potential as artists or to participate in cultural events.

Recent developments had included the use of two adjacent shops in Wokingham Town centre where artists could display their work, and in 2010 and 2011 the More Arts Trail had been a great success, giving artists of all kinds the opportunity to display their work in their own workshops or houses. The public were also encouraged to gain hands-on experience during their visit. Workshops had been set up where such skills as jewellery-making and wood-turning could be developed.

The Arts Bar in Wellington Road had held regular exhibitions and an Arts Loan scheme was being created with work from schools being shown on the More Wokingham website for businesses and other institutions to order works of art on loan. By promoting such activities

she hoped that local strategic partnerships would develop involving the Council, care services and the voluntary sector. Essentially Mrs Hewetson saw art as the 'golden thread' linking all sectors of the community.

She then introduced David McLuckie who expressed his commitment to the development of the Arts in Wokingham, reflecting his background in journalism and theatre. He stressed the important contribution played by the Arts and Culture in helping to ensure a community's prosperity, and he pointed out the major impact of annual events in Wokingham such as the May Fayre, the Winter Carnival and the Food and Drink Festival. He said that 8% of all new start-up businesses were in the cultural field and he felt it was vital that there should be an organisation dedicated to fostering and developing cultural activities within the community.

Nigel Griffiths, whose work was on display at the meeting, then told the meeting that he had come to art late and had discovered that he had skill as a wood turner. He said that his experience had made him want to help others to realise their own potential and he was therefore very involved in setting up workshops, particularly with young people with special educational needs. He recounted his experiences with his students, describing how excited they were when they were able to create something by themselves.

Mr Griffiths felt very strongly that the key to developing a successful arts programme lay with children and he stressed the significance and importance of the *Hands-on* programme as a means of encouraging young people to gain experience in creating artefacts or developing artistic skills. The Partnership would continue to encourage the people of Wokingham to develop and exhibit their Art individually or as a group and it would also advise people how to form a group if required. He concluded by saying that people looking to relocate often looked at the cultural life of a community before making a decision.

There then followed a lively and constructive session in which members of the audience were invited to express their views. The team responded positively to the varied comments and questions and promised to ensure that all art forms would receive the support of the Partnership. Gwynneth Hewetson also supported the idea of a Cultural or Heritage Centre and looked forward to fruitful artful collaboration in the future involving all the many cultural and social organisations in the community, not least in the organisation of events commemorating the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.

The visitors were then thanked for their presentation and Peter Must hoped that there would be close co-operation between the Society and the Partnership in the future.