

Chairman's Opening Statement for the 54th Annual General Meeting -

I welcome you to the 54th Annual General Meeting of The Heather Society here at the Walnut Tree Hotel. North Petherton. Somerset.

The Society has performed well this year to date with all its functions and responsibilities being addressed.

Secretarial duties have been undertaken by Phil Joyner, membership and finances by Mrs Ally Fitz-Earle.

Conference organiser Mrs Susie Kay. Web Master Dave Brown. The rest of Council consisting of Barry Sellers, Richard Canovan, Andy Collins, John Hall and myself as Chairman. Mrs Samantha Barnes as News Letter Editor and Society contact. Daphne Everett continues as Cutting Exchange co-ordinator.

David Edge has accepted the position of Registrar in a personal capacity.

Membership has settled to a low figure compared to that of previous years but is at a stable low with new memberships generally equating to losses.

As from last year The Heather Society website continues to be updated by Council member Dave Brown. It has the facility of an exclusive member's only area with an online payment facility via Paypal facilitating an easier method of making membership and other payments to the Society. In addition he continues to update photographs of the individual heather varieties to enhance the site.

Forest Edge Nurseries repeated a presence at The Hampton Court 2017 RHS Garden Show constructing a heather garden exhibit within the Floral Marquee, under the banner of The Heather Garden, gaining a Silver Gilt Medal. My thanks goes again to those members of the Society for assisting in the manning of the stand, handing out over 1000 leaflets detailing Heather Society membership and providing valued advice to members of the public.

Council member John Hall, with the assistance of Society members has continued to promote the Society and heathers at RHS Wisley events. In addition John is continuing to liaise with Wisley RHS regarding the proposed re development of the heather collection and the propagation of 1000 cultivars for a replanting scheme. In association with the RHS John also is trialling winter heather varieties at Whitehall Nurseries for the RHS Award of Merit Scheme and arranged a viewing this year for Society members.

Regional groups have continued to struggle with attendances and the efforts of our organisers John Griffiths, Dorothy Warner are appreciated. Further The Society is grateful to Council member Barry Sellers and others for the representation of the Society Home Counties Group in association with RHS Wisley.

Daphne Everett has undertaken the running and organisation of the cuttings swop scheme. The Society will endeavour to continue this scheme as a benefit to Society membership. Jean Preston continues as the Society's Slide Librarian

Mr Andrew Collins has submitted his resignation from Council. Mrs Susie Kay will not be organising future Conferences but it is a proposal that the 2018 AGM will be held in September at Wisley Gardens and combined with a member's 'gathering' at this date. Council welcomes applications from members to sit on Council to enable its function to continue.

Following the resignation of Dr Nelson the Society does not have a year book editor and currently has no arrangement for a 2018 publication.

Following discussion Council agreed at the June meeting to cease being a registered Charity within 3 years and to liquidate the Societies investments to enable the Society to have flexibility of their purpose and utilisation. Discussion will take place at the open forum during Conference with regard to the future of the Heather Society. Upon consideration of its dissolution as a registered Charity the Society will need to consider its future role, its membership benefits and disposal of its assets.

The National Heather Collection remains at Wisley and we look forward to the proposed re development and planting at this site. We encourage the onward development of additional planting at Perth and continue to support the National Collection status of Holehird Gardens in the Lake District for its comprehensive collection of Daboecia

I reproduce my text from previous;

As you may be aware the Society has good financial reserves but is reliant on a small vital number of volunteers who act as your Council, having maintained and ensured its smooth progress over the years to the current time. However, whilst new memberships are now approximately at parity with losses, bear in mind that our membership figure is now almost one tenth of that of former years. Additionally the age profile of the members increases year on year with few younger age memberships. Council members are not excluded from the ageing process and, despite calls for 'new blood' to assist with the roles, sufficient replacements have not been forthcoming to date. There remains a body of keen and interested members within the UK and abroad whose future interests in heathers must be considered and catered for.

Returning from the Heather Society Conference at Perth I have appreciated more how important these annual gatherings are. Apart from the local group meetings it is the only occasion when members from across the country have the opportunity to get together to socialise, meet up with friends face to face, and have gossip/discussions about heathers and other varied topics.

The Heather Society is not unique in this position as many other societies face a similar situation, indeed because of its prudent investments made during its early years it is in a better position than many. However, unless exceptional, and one must consider unlikely changes in the Societies' fortunes occur, the Heather Society must face the possibility of its demise within the next decade.

Council will need to address the future viability of the Society and consider its way forward, satisfying the requirements of its membership set against declining income. It has been actively participating in activities to highlight its presence but with limited results..

Despite these underlying issues the Society has continued to provide an excellent level of service and commitment to its members, making economies wherever and whenever practical.

Council is not despondent, challenges need to be faced and problems solved. It is my firm belief that your Council has the motivation and qualities to maintain the Society in as healthy a condition as possible for as long as possible.

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On the plus side;

The Society has good financial assets. Council is fortunate in have a replacement Treasurer and news letter editor and contact point. There remains an interested nucleus of members having an active interest in the plant. It has an excellent informative website and face book site. Two nursery members play an active part in promoting the Society and its plants at public attended events.

On the debit side.

The majority of the membership is reaching, or has reached, an age where travel to meetings is a serious consideration. Membership is gradually declining due to age and lack of 'new blood' and fewer people now join societies; fewer people have gardens or are garden orientated and other interests now occupy the public's attention.

As a registered Charity the Society has to conform to Charity Rules.

Proposal

A proposal is for the Heather Society to de- register from being a charity and this would enable the formation of a Society or unit such as a club which would have greater flexibility with its assets, finances and meetings, retaining however in general its rules, aims and objectives.

In addition it would remove the expense and requirement for a financial examiner to audit the accounts, these continue to being made annually available to members

Rules 21. Dissolution

The Society can only be dissolved at a General Meeting by a majority vote of members present. In the event of the Society being wound up, after payment of all debts and liabilities, the assets of the Society shall pass to a Charity with similar objects, or to be used for similar charitable purposes.

The Heather Society, upon consideration of its dissolution as a registered Charity will need to consider its future role, its membership benefits and disposal or otherwise of its assets. Continuing with its educational aspect (its website, attendance at public events) it may be considered that this is a 'charitable purpose' albeit not being a charity in name and able to retain its financial assets within a new structure.

I thank all the members of Council for their attendance at meetings and their valued input contributing to the running of the Society throughout the past year.

David Edge

Chairman