

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2016

My Chairman's Report for 2015 came at the end of a year of considerable change for the Dean Heritage Centre and against a trend of falling visitor numbers. I had hoped that, twelve months later, I would be able to report that we had managed to get things back on an even course and that the changes in staff would all have settled down, not least because I had extended my term as Chairman for an additional twelve months in order to try and accomplish this and thus hand things over to my successor in a better state. However, for a number of reasons, this hoped for improvement in our situation has not yet happened.

Visitor numbers have continued to decline, at quite an alarming rate during the first half of the year, when we were running at a figure of around half of last year's numbers; and bear in mind that they in turn were down on the previous year. The heady days of the first Gruffalo trail now seem a distant memory but, in a bid to turn things round, a revived Gruffalo trail was introduced in the summer and this certainly seems to have dramatically arrested that decline, certainly for the time being. Fewer visitors also of course means less of a spend in the shop and the whole thing becomes a downward spiral that can seem impossible to turn around. However, thanks to the sterling efforts of everyone on site but particularly centre manager Emma Smith and site manager Clayton Ryder, that turnaround has been effected and we are still here. Not to put too fine a point on things, if we had not seen this improvement, it is highly likely that the centre would have closed at the end of the summer holidays.

The continuing issues regarding staffing, on all fronts, also serve only to prevent us moving forward as we would wish. The PR & Marketing position is vacant again, after Nikki Bigwood left at the end of August having decided to pursue a career in teaching instead. Due to our challenging financial position, it was decided by the Trustees in consultation with Emma not to replace her for the time being. Similarly, we have also still not replaced Phillippa Turner, who left our collections department over a year ago. Nicola Wynn continues to soldier on as our sole Collections Officer under very trying and far from ideal circumstances. I can only apologise to her for this but, again due to our financial situation, we are still some way from being able to provide her with back up.

We are also now in dire need of additional help on the Board of Trustees. Edward Beard, who, like me joined as a member in 2003, stood down a few weeks ago. Ed had been struggling with major health issues for some months, so it was not a surprise that he decided to step away. Additionally, Graeme Schrouder, who has been a trustee for the last six years and who would have been up for re-election by rote this evening, has decided not to stand again. Graeme also has not been in the best of health recently and has missed a number of board meetings as a result. Both Ed and Graeme deserve a huge round of thanks for the tremendous support that they have given to the DHC over the years; Ed, in particular, leaves with the legacy of his water wheel project having come to fruition, something on which he put in years of effort. It is imperative therefore that we find new trustees to assist in the management of the charitable trust that oversees the running of the DHC.

We have had and continue to get significant support from other bodies and organisations. The Friends of the DHC have long provided back-up to the trust, as have the Forest of Dean Branch of the Round Table. Significant grant support has also been achieved this year, which will assist going forward with advertising and promotion, and the training of staff in order to help us reach our goal of sustainability. However, a meeting with members of Forest of Dean District Council was less productive. Whilst sympathetic to our plight and willing to provide advice and back-up, it was made clear that they are in no way able or prepared to assist us financially in any way.

Accordingly, we have finally decided that we have no choice but to move forward with a suggestion that was strongly suggested to us in two independent reports, one of which was commissioned on our behalf by FoDDC. It has become standard practice in our industry sector over the last decade or so to take catering operations 'in house', in order to maximise profits and help pay for the running of such operations as ours. It is with regret therefore, following a long association with Kay Bird, who has operated the cafe here for many years, that in early October we served twelve months notice on her to leave. This is double the minimum notice that we had to give but we felt it only fair that we gave Kay the maximum possible opportunity to relocate her business elsewhere should she so wish. We fully recognize the distress that this will have caused to her, as well as her friends family and staff, but we are in the invidious position of having to make hard decisions in order that the DHC remains open and it is highly likely that there will be no DHC for a cafe to operate in if we do not take this action. It is thus the case that one way or another the cafe's tenure here would have been coming to an end.

To finish, it is now time for me to announce that this year I am indeed standing down as Chairman. I stayed for the extra year as Emma and Nikki were new in position and I felt it was unfair on them to change Chairman as well. However, the demands of running a busy and expanding publishing business, coupled with the usual calls on mum and dad's time by 'independent' teenagers dictates that I take a step back. Mary has bravely put herself forward for election in my place. Over the last year she has built up an excellent working relationship with Emma and has also taken a fair bit of the workload off my shoulders, so I am very confident that she can make the step up into the role full-time, as it were. She has long had the best interests of the DHC at heart and will bring renewed energy to the role. She will need the support and backing of everyone involved with the centre but knowing the way the team here pulls together anyway, I have no doubt that she will receive that.

I have been coming to these meetings for some thirteen years. I first became a member in 2003 and then a trustee the following year, so I have seen a few ups and downs and a few comings and goings. I had intended to step down tonight as Chairman but continue as a trustee. However, a few weeks ago I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, so I have now decided that I would prefer to step away completely in order to concentrate on dealing with this. I am giving you all the news not for sympathy – the cancer has been caught early and I fully expect to make a complete recovery – but to alleviate thoughts that a lot of faces seemed to be abandoning a sinking ship! This is not the case and I fully expect the DHC, under the guidance of Mary and Emma, and with the continued support of everyone here, including education officer Jo, admin officer Louise, the rest of the site staff and all of the volunteers, to also make a full recovery. This further loss from the board does, however, further serve to emphasize the desperate need for new trustees. I shall always have the DHC in my heart, will continue to visit regularly and may yet come back again at some stage in the future. For now though, I thank you all, it has been a pleasure to work with you. *Neil Parkhouse*