

FIFTY YEARS OF THE FRIENDS OF GUILDFORD HOUSE

From the 1960s, there was a growing interest in creating support societies for Museums & Art Galleries and historic buildings ie "Friends". Therefore when I came to Guildford in 1969 as Exhibitions Officer (later Curator) of Guildford House, I suggested a Friends society should be started to create interest in the gallery and its exhibitions and give financial and physical assistance. I acted as Hon. Secretary (and Visits Secretary) for 28 years. The Friends were registered as a charity in 1994, the charitable objects being 'the advancement of public education in the arts in particular through promotion, support, assistance and improvement of Guildford House Art Gallery'

Meetings. The first season of monthly meetings started in October 1970. Over the years major speakers included Laurence Bradbury from the Tate Gallery who came regularly for about 20 years and could persuade members to appreciate modern art as well as other topics. Other talks could be related to an exhibition in Guildford House or a London exhibition to be visited or include Arts Council films. Until about 25 years ago the talks were held in the Brew House with entry from North Street but when the room's capacity was reduced to 60, the meetings moved to the Guildhall.

Financial assistance. When suitable purchases were proposed for the gallery, the Friends offered a contribution towards the cost or provided the full sum. Over 50 years more than £35,000 has been donated. The first picture purchased was a bright sunny watercolour of Winchelsea by Edward Wesson (famous artist living in Guildford). Large donations were given towards Russell's pastel portraits. For example, Dorothy Jordan, and in 2000, Judith (his sister-in law) and in 2019 Anna Louise Halsey with squirrel. Purchases for the craft collection include a 25th anniversary decorated plate by Laurence McGowan. Recently 2 showcases were provided in memory of 2 past Chairmen, Ivor Richards and Peter Gautrey. Grants were also given to educational projects. Stewarding for special exhibitions such as Marion May's Costume displays and Heritage Days is also of valuable assistance.

Visits. At first a few visits were arranged to exhibitions in London and historic houses etc. but these increased to about 10 annually. These continue monthly and their profits help to provide finance for purchases for the gallery. Early visits were made to a selection of cultural activities including ballet, concerts and opera. When Covent Garden group tickets were available at reasonable rates we enjoyed opera or ballet and also two trips to Glyndebourne opera. Over the years, many visits to houses, gardens and major exhibitions are memorable.

We look forward to another 50 years of encouraging visitors to enjoy Guildford House

Iris Hawkins