

THE CITY OF LONDON SOLICITORS' COMPANY



JOHN WOTTON
MASTER

Outgoing Master's Statement **John Wotton** **15th June 2020**

Fellow Solicitors, it has been an honour and a pleasure to serve as Master of this Worshipful Company for the past year. It has also been something of a surprise to find myself leading a virtual Livery Company for the past three months, a concept scarcely imaginable when I took office. For the entire Livery movement, the past year has been one of unprecedented events, which have required us to be both resolute and flexible in our responses. In the throes of the all-embracing crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, we may overlook the impact of the atrocity at Fishmongers' Hall, only two days after the Company's Livery Dinner there, when two young law graduates were murdered, their killer shot dead by the police and several others severely injured. The confidence we have always felt in our personal safety at Livery events was called in question and the Halls and civic buildings were obliged to step up their security measures.

Hardly were these measures in place, before all our lives were turned upside down by Covid-19. I cannot say that the Company was fully prepared for this new crisis. In the days leading up to our Annual Banquet at the Mansion House, the pandemic spread around the world, the first cases were reported in Britain and we began to wonder what the implications might be for Livery events. Even "elbow-bumping" the Lord Mayor and civic party, rather than shaking hands, however, did not warn us that the Banquet would be the last major Company event for quite some time. Fortunately, the timing of the next Court meeting, on 16th March was serendipitous and, while the die was not quite cast for a lockdown, the trend was sufficiently clear to prompt us to make arrangements for the Company to continue to function without holding meetings in person, should the need arise. By the evening of that day, it was clear that it would. I am proud of the way in which the Court and the wider Company have responded constructively and flexibly to these unprecedented circumstances and I am especially grateful to our Clerk, Linzi James and the rest of the Company's staff, on whom much of the burden of keeping the wheels turning has fallen. They have adapted to working from home very effectively, kept us all in communication with each other, organised countless Zoom meetings for both business and pleasure and remained cheerful and positive throughout. Thank you all, very much.

Many of the major events of the year took place successfully. The Livery Dinner at Fishmongers' Hall, our Annual Banquet at the Mansion House and the Court and Committees Dinner at Cutlers' Hall were all enjoyable and well-attended. Our guest speakers, Sir Andrew Parmley and Tony Juniper, provided good entertainment and plenty of food for thought, as did the Lord Mayor. The provision of music of a high professional standard at both the Livery Dinner and the Banquet was widely appreciated and I hope it will continue to feature in our events. A thought-provoking legal ethics seminar and an excellent wine-tasting were also held. The Company's float in the Lord Mayor's Show was as striking as ever and it was tremendous fun for me and the Wardens to walk the route with our enthusiastic and tireless troupe of gorgeously-costumed participants.

A highlight of the year was proposing the vote of thanks to the outgoing Sheriffs at Common Hall, a duty which fell to me as Master of the Mother Company of Past Master Alderman Vincent Keaveny. We were, until the coronavirus intervened, looking forward to celebrating the election of Vincent as Lord Mayor later this year, as well as that of Alderman and Liveryman Alison Gowman as Sheriff. We must now wait another year for these welcome events, as the current Lord Mayor and Sheriffs will be re-elected for 2020-2021, to maintain continuity of civic leadership of the City during the pandemic. Sadly, as the crisis has unfolded since the Banquet, we have had to take the regrettable but unavoidable decision to postpone all the Company's events planned for before the summer break, including an event for in house solicitors, a trip to an English winery, the Annual Service and Supper, the Master's Weekend in Cornwall, a lunch to mark the 500th Court Meeting and the Reception after the AGM. We hope that it will be possible to reschedule all these events in 2020-2021.

A Livery Company whose members cannot meet in person to celebrate the fellowship is but a pale shadow of itself. The virtual world is no substitute for the real one and I hope that our true character may soon re-emerge from the constraints of social distancing.

The Junior Warden, Tony King, has led two important projects during the year, a review of membership benefits and charges and the establishment of a diversity and inclusion working group, both of which will move the Company forward. I am particularly grateful to him for taking on these responsibilities and discharging them so effectively. During the year, ten new Liverymen have been elected. Sadly, several Liverymen have died during the year: Patrick Deane Daniels, Peter Graham Horrocks, Robert Charles Lane CBE. We would have marked their passing at the Annual Service. As that was not possible, I pay tribute to them now, on behalf of the Company.

In my incoming Master's statement at the last AGM, I laid stress on the importance of philanthropy, through the Company's Charitable Fund. I am pleased to say that Liverymen and Freemen have responded generously with gifts to the Charitable Fund. In 2019, donations and legacies to the Fund were £28,389 (2018 £16,874) and in 2020 to the end of March they amount to £6,991 (2019 £5,526) and I hope that the momentum of increased giving will be sustained. This has enabled us not only to renew our support for the Haringey Law Centre for a further three years, but also to make a substantial one-off donation, supplemented by generous individual

donations from members of the Company, towards the costs the Law Centre has incurred in equipping its staff to work from home. The lockdown has delayed the identification of a further access to justice project for the Company to support, but I am confident that the Charitable Fund now has the resources to make such a commitment.

I thank the Wardens, Treasurer, Honorary Solicitor, Court, Clerk, Beadle and staff for their support and hard work during the year. I also thank the Committee Chairs and members for their important contribution to the work of the Company and the Chair, Chief Executive and staff of the City of London Law Society for keeping the partnership between the Company and CLLS going so well. I wish the Senior Warden, Robert Bell, joy in his year as Master, coupled with the hope that not much of it will be affected by the pandemic. I also thank my wife, Linde, for her support and encouragement throughout the year.

Thank you all.