

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT, 2001/2002

By JOE DESOISA

1. INTRODUCTION

Good Evening, Ladies and Gentlemen and thank you all for being here. May I offer a particular warm welcome to the Honourable Keith Azopardi, Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Heritage. I understand that this is the first occasion on which a Minister has been present at the Trust's AGM and I thank him for being here and giving of his valuable time.

I have arranged my report under five main headings, namely,

- (a) To report on the business of the Trust for the current year.
- (b) To explore what we have planned for the future.
- (c) To describe how the Trust is operating within the framework set up by Government for the management of heritage in Gibraltar.
- (d) To congratulate the Government on some of its developments and voice concern on others.
- (e) To thank the members of the Board for all the effort that they expended in carrying out the business of the Trust.

I suggest, however, that at the end of my report I should only take those questions directly relating to the Trust. With the Minister here present, questions concerning the wider issues of Gibraltar's heritage will be more informatively and authoritatively answered by him after his address.

2. HAPPENINGS THIS YEAR

1. This year has been one of consolidation rather than engaging in new projects, although even in this respect, it was marked by three events. Firstly, we mounted a successful exhibition of the Haynes collection of 17th and 18th century maps and charts of Gibraltar and the Strait. The exhibition was opened by the Minister for Heritage. These prints provide the theme of next year's Heritage Trust Calendar and we thank Mr Haynes for his kindness in allowing us to make use of the prints for this purpose.

2. The Governor inaugurated the newly restored Marshman Murals in the Convent, thus bringing to a very successful conclusion this major project which was commenced last year. We are grateful for the assistance that we received from the Friends of Gibraltar Heritage Society, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Government of Gibraltar and the University of Cadiz.

3. A start has now been made on the restoration of the stained glass windows of the Sacred Heart School Chapel. I have high hopes of this particular project because it will bring the concept of heritage to the attention of a younger generation. I thank the Minister and his colleague Dr Linares, Minister of Culture, for the assistance that they have given us towards meeting the costs involved.

Additionally, the Trust has also been engaged in a number of smaller tasks which have included renovating dedicatory plaques within Trafalgar Cemetery; repainting the Black Watch Cairn at Eastern Beach; marking the site of the last remaining visible anti-tank obstacles from World War II and repairing the Elliott statue in the Convent patio. If any of our members or, indeed, of the public in general think that there are other objects of this nature that require attention we would be pleased to hear from them.

This year's Art Competition, centred on the Garrison Library, was a particular success and attracted a record number of entries. On the other hand, there were few entries for the Heritage Awards and even these were not within the published guidelines. This is usually an award for which there is keen competition and I look forward to attracting a greater number of entries in the coming year.

The Annual Visit of the Friends was a great success. David has set himself a high standard for the future and is working on plans for a visit by a Polish delegation to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the death of General Sikorski in Gibraltar during the War. Originally, a much bigger event was planned to mark this anniversary but this has had to be curtailed because of improper Spanish political interference.

After a lot of hard work, the 2002 Heritage Calendar came out with just weeks to spare before the end of the year. The 2003 Calendar has not been without its difficulties but we have managed to obtain it a little earlier than in previous years and it is now on sale.

The Gibraltar Heritage Journal is also now well established as the repository for articles and anecdotes concerning Gibraltar's past which would otherwise go unrecorded. The Trust is grateful for all the work that Tito Benady has put in as editor of the Journal. Our thanks are also due to all our advertisers and in particular to Gibtelcom which sponsors the publication. We also, of course, thank all the contributors. Last year saw the publication of Journal Number 8 and we now look forward to Number 9 being edited this year by Paul Baker.

As in previous years, the programme of tours and visits organised throughout the year have proved very popular with our members. This year three of these visits were to sites of historical interest in Spain. One of these visits turned out to be particularly adventurous and resulted in the participants having to make their own arrangements to return home, leaving the coach stranded in a field with mud up to its axles. Attendance at the meetings that followed proved, as expected, that our members' enthusiasm for history and heritage had in no way been dampened.

The Trust has occupied its new Offices at the Main Guard in John Mackintosh Square for well

over a year now. So far, we have not organised an official opening because essential repair work still remains to be done and the widespread damp penetration of the walls would constitute a very unattractive backdrop to any official ceremony. I have taken the opportunity of raising the matter of repairs at the Heritage Action Committee and it is in this respect that I wish to express my special thanks to the Minister. It has been as a direct result of his intervention that we now have grounds to be cautiously optimistic that the exterior of the building will be refurbished in the not too distant future.

Whether because of all these activities or because our offices are more centrally located within the town, it is gratifying to report that the Trust's membership has shown a significant increase over previous years and is now nearing the 600 mark.

3. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE AND OUR RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENT

Our heritage is but a reflection of our identity as a people. It is not therefore something to be determined or defined by government. Our heritage assets, the hardware as it were, on the other hand are often the property of government.

One of the essential functions of the Heritage Trust is to serve as a channel of communication between government and the public in order to ensure that adequate legislation is in place that enforces the preservation and proper management of these assets and buildings, if necessary, overriding other government priorities and vested private interests. It is to be expected, therefore, that the relationship between the Trust and government and sometimes sections within the community will always be characterised by tension.

The restoration projects in which the Heritage Trust engages have a secondary, though still important, purpose. They allow people who value their history to become involved, either actively or by proxy, in ensuring that our links with the past are preserved.

However, we have just about now reached a stage where the Trust cannot engage in any major projects independently of Government simply because the buildings that require restoration belong to Government and, more pertinently, because the Trust does not have the financial and manpower resources needed for major undertakings. This fact leads me to explore another aspect of the Trust's relationship with government – that of co-operation.

It was officially insisted after our last AGM that 'the Trust had never had a bigger role than now'. I have no knowledge of the status that the Trust enjoyed prior to 1999, but the declared proposition is one with which I would not dream to disagree. During the past year we have established a good working relationship with the Government's Heritage Division and Trustees serve on three government committees. This gives us the opportunity of keeping abreast with Government thinking on heritage matters and voicing public concerns on anything pertaining to heritage.

Thus it is that within the forum of the Heritage Action Committee we are jointly considering ways in which to commemorate two important anniversaries that will soon be upon us. The first is the tercentenary of the British capture of Gibraltar. The idea of establishing a walk

along the City Walls has been mooted. The Trust and the Friends are also considering erecting a bust of Admiral Rooke (this is not a firm commitment – only an idea!) – but if developed further we would still require government approval and assistance on where to site the bust.

The other event that is fast approaching is the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar. The Trust has suggested celebrating this by erecting a statue of Admiral Nelson in the vicinity of Southport Gates and has already obtained preliminary costings. Apart from its historical significance, I believe that such a project would be of great benefit to our City and would enhance the perennial attraction of Trafalgar Cemetery for visiting tourists. I aim to discuss the matter further with the Friends next month at their Warwick Seminar but, of course, the ultimate decision regarding this project rests with Government.

4. DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE PAST YEAR

Since our last AGM we have seen many developments of a heritage nature on which the Government deserves congratulation. At the head of the list must be the start of the renovation of the Theatre Royal. We also note that the Old Naval Hospital is being developed into a residential complex whilst still retaining much of its external character and that the same is also true of the proposed development of the Royal Naval Hospital.

The invitation for tenders for the redevelopment of the Rosia Bay, Victualling Yard and Grand Magazine areas was prefaced by the stipulation that the submitted plans would be required to take due cognisance of the heritage and historical importance of the areas.

There is a downside to all this, of course, which must also be entered into the record. Many members of the Heritage Trust can testify to the steady erosion of Gibraltar's architectural heritage and perhaps none better than Tito Vallejo and Marjorie Hoare who have sounded the tocsin in this respect in recent issues of the Trust's Newsletter.

In the past year or so we have witnessed the successive demolition of 18th or 19th century buildings in Europa Road and Rosia Parade and, most distressing of all, the building in John Mackintosh Square which dated from shortly after the Great Siege. Whilst the architectural merit of the first two was debatable, the fact that they were allowed to disappear without proper record being made of the sites betrays an attitude which still shows little regard for our past.

As letters to the Chronicle pointed out, the demolition of the Rosia Parade house also encompassed the complete destruction of a garden containing very mature trees, thus breaching the conditions under which demolition permission was granted. The demolition also revealed tantalising indications that the site could have been that of one of the old Spanish churches known to have existed in the area.

However, the issue that has attracted most complaints from our members and the general public and that has aroused the greatest sense of outrage is the destruction of the building in John Mackintosh Square adjacent to the Trust's own offices. The fact is that the Heritage

Division, naturally with the support of the Trust, made great efforts to effect the survival of that building.

I believe that the building was not beyond repair and perhaps more could have been done such as seeking a second opinion regarding its condition. But such further efforts would ultimately have been pointless. The building was doomed from the start because it was not listed and existing heritage legislation was unable to afford it any protection. There is no disguising the fact, however, that the disappearance of this quintessential example of vernacular Gibraltarian architecture is a serious loss to our heritage which the Trust was powerless to prevent. Once again, requests for an archaeological investigation prior to demolition fell on deaf ears.

So why is it that such things can happen in a City so proud of its inheritance as to aspire to world heritage designation? How is it that we are prepared to spend millions on the restoration of what was once the centre of Gibraltar's cultural life and at the same time tolerate the continued existence of the Old Generating Station whose brooding presence masks another of our valuable heritage assets and inhibits its sustainable redevelopment?

The answer probably lies in the inexorable and unrelenting pressure for development that is exerted on Gibraltar's limited territory. If that is so, then the survival of the City's character and heritage may eventually prove incompatible with the success of Gibraltar Limited.

There may also be another more deeply rooted explanation. Professor Larry Sawchuk, that student and friend of Gibraltar, has noted that the overcrowding endemic in 19th century Gibraltar coupled to the rarity of private property ownership created a 'duality of perception of public and private space and the responsibility for its upkeep [which] remains today an important element of the Gibraltarian ethos'.

This may explain why the visual pollution caused to the very emblem of Gibraltar's identity by painting the top of the Rock Cable Car Station in a livery of salmon pink was not immediately and vigorously challenged. Now, apparently, the Station is to be repainted, this time in green – illustrating the truth of Marx's dictum that history is repeated, firstly as tragedy and then as farce.

The illegal construction of a porch to a club housed within the City Walls at the USOC car park is only the latest example of the contempt in which current planning regulations are held. Thus, not only is our heritage legislation inadequate – even what we have is all too feebly enforced, so that illegal works proliferate and the unique character of the City is steadily and irreparably eroded.

Our only hope of reversing this trend rests on the new heritage legislation that is currently in preparation and on the expectation that when it is enacted it shall be vigorously enforced. We may draw comfort from the fact that the Minister has demonstrated a personal commitment to the new Ordinance and a determination to get it onto the Statute Book as soon as possible.

5. MY THANKS

I wish to thank all the members of the Board for their support over the past year. This long list begins with Pepe Ballantine. It is a great advantage to have a Vice-Chairman at all, but Pepe has been a tower of strength in all respects, as well acting as the Trust's official representative on the DPC.

Diane attends meetings of the DPC when Pepe cannot make it. She has also displayed a happy knack of pulling rabbits out of the hat when they are most needed. Last year she acquired all the Trust's furniture for its new offices. This year she suggested the name of our new treasurer when we were being pressurised from all sides to bring our accounts up to date.

Doris is our newly self-designated 'Calendar Co-ordinator'. It is because of her unflagging efforts that we are able to produce the Calendar at all and she also organises the advertising for the Journal.

David's membership has been a stroke of immense good fortune for the Trust. Originally his responsibility was only to organise the Friends visit, but he has demonstrated that there are few tasks in which he is not ready or able to assist.

We have Eric to thank for the successful map exhibition earlier this year, but he also has done much else including co-ordinating the Trust's comments on the new Heritage Ordinance.

Tito, with his unbounded enthusiasm, has continued to come up with new ideas for the Trust's yearly Programme of Events as well as leading them for the most part. I wish to thank John Murphy and Ralph Capurro who have stood in for Tito when he has not been available.

I thank Sam for his continuing help in writing up the Calendar and his book reviews for the Trust's Newsletter.

Pepe Romero has the task of looking after all matters relating to Parson's Lodge and the Victualling Yard, and I thank him for the persistence and patience with which he has carried this out.

I thank Alexis for his continuing involvement with the Trust and I value the benefit of his experience as previous Chairman.

I thank Eddie Davies and Dennis King for their contributions but my gratitude will be that more explicit after the production of the 2004 Heritage Calendar for which they are collecting material.

Paco Galliano, Marjorie, Eddie Guerrero and John Langdon, all either Co-opted or Life Trustees, continue to make their expertise available when needed.

I wish to thank Alan Lieb for looking after Parson's Lodge, Pepe Rosado who continues his

tours of the Convent and so contributes to the Trust's coffers and Nick Keeling for acting as the Trust's solicitor.

I thank Louis Pisani and Philip Jardim for preparing this year's accounts and finalising those for last year and I warmly welcome Roy Harding as our new Treasurer.

Finally, but certainly not least, I thank Brenda our secretary for her unstinting devotion to the Trust's affairs which sees her in the Office when other less hardy souls would be at home nursing an illness.

I close by thanking all the members of the Trust for their support. It is the duty of the Board to administer the business of the Trust but the fate of our Heritage is ultimately in your hands.