

CHAIRMAN'S ANNUAL REPORT, 2003/2004

By JOE DESOISA

1. INTRODUCTION

Good Evening, Ladies and Gentlemen. I thank you all for being here. I offer a particular warm welcome to the Honourable Clive Beltran, Minister for Heritage, Culture, Youth and Sport and Mayor of Gibraltar. It is, of course, as Minister for Heritage that we are especially pleased to see him here this evening following the precedent that has now been established for the Minister to address the Trust's Annual General Meeting.

It is also my pleasure to formally welcome two newly nominated members of the Board, Colin Skinner and Isobel Ellul-Hammond, who unfortunately cannot be here this evening, and to thank the two retired members, Tito Vallejo and Pepe Romero, for their years of service to the Trust.

As in previous years, I suggest that we defer questions from members until after the Minister's address, since we may both wish to comment on similar issues.

2. THE PAST YEAR

This past year has been a busy one for the Trust and, in common with other societies and organisations, its activities have been dominated by our Tercentenary celebrations.

Indeed, the Trust can claim to have staged the very first event in these celebrations when the Chief Minister, in the presence of his Excellency the Governor and the Minister, launched our Tercentenary Calendar at a special exhibition describing and illustrating the capture of Gibraltar in 1704. You will be pleased to learn that the Calendar was a great success and we could, in fact, have sold more than the 2,500 copies that were printed.

Those of you who were present at last year's AGM may recall that, following suggestions from the floor, it was decided that the Trust should mark the Tercentenary with a memorial taking the form of a bust of Admiral Rooke.

The Rooke Bust has in fact turned out to be the Trust's main project during 2004 and I wish to thank Minister Holliday for meeting the cost of the visit made by Sharon Keenan, the lady sculptor who undertook the commission, and who came to Gibraltar to discuss possible designs and locations. Sharon's artistic skill and talent were never in question, but it proved immensely difficult to agree on an acceptable design and in the end what started out as a modest bust and costing some £14,000 evolved into an eight foot high, full-length figure standing on a two tiered plinth and costing nearer to £46,000.

This cost will be met by a £10,000 contribution from the Friends of Gibraltar Heritage and £11,000 from the Ministry of Heritage, and I wish to express my immense gratitude to the Minister for honouring a commitment that was inherited by him. The remaining £25,000 will come from the Trust's funds.

It is also a pleasure to acknowledge the generosity of our sponsors and the readiness with which they agreed to assist the Trust in this venture and I am grateful to GB Airways, Transport Services, the Masbro and MiddleSea Insurance Companies, Monteverde and Son and Fairhomes Limited which will provide the reception that will follow the unveiling ceremony.

I also wish to acknowledge the support that the Trust has received from the Heritage 2004 Committee, the Technical Services Department, the Tourist Board, the Chief Minister's Office and the Royal Gibraltar Police, which still has a further part to play on the day. I thank Glen Cano for the tremendous effort he has put into this project and I wish to express my sincere and affectionate thanks to Sharon.

The unveiling of this Statue will be carried out by the Chief Minister this coming Monday, the 29th November, at the Devil's Tongue where it was finally decided to locate it – an appropriate spot since the North Mole witnessed considerable activity during the capture of Gibraltar in 1704. Everybody is, of course, welcome to attend the unveiling ceremony on Monday at 11am.

Despite the many events and ceremonies that have been organised to mark the Tercentenary, it is a matter of some pride to the Trust that this Statue will constitute the only permanent memorial specifically designed to commemorate the 300th Anniversary of British Gibraltar.

The Trust's contribution to the Tercentenary celebrations also included a Ball, proposed and single-handedly organised by Diane Sloma, and held at the Convent by kind permission of Sir Francis and Lady Richards. Diane, who cannot be present this evening but has expressed her wish to be re-elected to the Board, has previously assisted the Trust by acquiring for it a whole suite of office furniture when we first moved into our offices in the Main Guard. I hope that she will be in a position to render the Trust a similar favour when it takes over the ground floor of that Building, a point that I shall shortly discuss in more detail.

The Convent Garden was the venue of this year's Heritage Art Competition. We are grateful to the Friends of Gibraltar Heritage Society for donating the prizes for the Competition, and to His Excellency, who opened the Exhibition of all the entries to the Competition at the Casemates Galleries. As a token of its appreciation the Trust presented Sir Francis and Lady Richards with one of the winning entries, painted by Mario Finlayson, during their recent visit to our offices at the Main Guard.

This year the Friends arranged their annual visit to Gibraltar to coincide with the 4th August celebrations and at a Dinner jointly organised with the Trust and held at Rooke, Sir Derek Reffell announced his retirement as Chairman of the Society. I am sure that all Trust members will join me in expressing our thanks to Sir Derek for his devoted promotion of Gibraltar and its heritage and welcome Sir John Chapple, another proven friend of Gibraltar, as his successor as Chairman.

The Friends visit itself was organised by David Eveson – a job that has become very much his own since he was pitched into it in 2002. David also does another very important job for the Trust, which is to organise the restoration of the many historical plaques that are scattered

throughout Gibraltar. It is a task, which if done regularly is all too often taken for granted, but which if neglected reflects badly on Gibraltar for its apathy and indifference.

The Trust has restored many plaques during the course of the year, but particular mention should be made of Boyd's Tomb Memorial at the Linewall, and we are indebted to the RAF General Engineering Section which very expertly recreated the decorative railings that originally protected it. David, who is also standing for re-election this evening, is somebody the Trust's administration can ill-afford to lose.

Another significant advance that was achieved this year was the re-opening of Parson's Lodge which had been closed since October of last year. The new caretakers, Terry Penfold and his partner Angela, have approached their task with enthusiasm. Refreshments and meals are now served and the number of visitors has increased fourfold. The Trust has invested very nearly £4,000 in this site in order to comply with safety and public health regulations.

Parson's Lodge is a site of great historical interest but the Trust does not received any help from government to assist its upkeep, unlike other heritage sites such as the Moorish Castle or the Hundred Ton Gun, which are staffed and maintained by the Tourist Board. This is an imbalance which we shall attempt to correct in discussions with the Minister.

The Trust's major disappointment this year was the same as last year - our inability to complete the restoration of the former Christian Brothers' Chapel at Sacred Heart School. The first phase of this project, repairing the stained glass windows, was completed almost two years ago. We are advised that before attempting any repairs to the interior walls of the Chapel, the exterior rendering should be renewed.

This is a basic building maintenance task and therefore the proper responsibility of the Government or the Church, which owns the School Building. One of the first acts of the Minister, following his appointment, was, in fact, to grant the Trust £11,000 for this specific purpose and for which we are exceedingly grateful. Unfortunately, the lowest estimate for the job - which is best done during the winter months - is £20,000. So we are urgently hoping for more funding and until we get it the project is stalled.

3. THE MAIN GUARD OFFICES

However, the most important development on which I have to report for the year has nothing to do with the Tercentenary. It was, of course, the decision of the Chief Minister to make the whole of the Main Guard House in John Mackintosh Square available to the Trust. We are immensely grateful for this decision for it can profoundly affect the nature of the Trust's future activities.

The Guardroom itself is, perhaps, one of the oldest buildings in Gibraltar dating from at least 1753, that is, from before the Great Siege. In the years since it first served its original military purpose its true architectural character, particularly its façade, has been distorted and debased.

The Government has made a manifesto commitment to refurbish the Old Guard House and the Trust's first duty must be to formulate a strategy that will allow that commitment to

become a reality. Our aim is to restore this building to its former elegant simplicity and in the process complement the work that the Government has already carried out in the John Mackintosh Square itself.

Our second duty is less easily defined and therefore, perhaps, more difficult. But in order to make the most of this opportunity, we must change the all too common perspective of the Trust as something that runs itself or is adequately organised by Brenda, if only because Brenda will not be around for ever. We must seriously start to plan our future and enlarge the Trusts range of activities, particularly with respect to its members and to the general public. In order to do all this we must seek to increase our source of funding and employ more staff. It is with this very purpose in mind that the Vice-Chairman is leading a small working group.

4. PLANS FOR NEXT YEAR

2005 will mark the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar which is being celebrated throughout the Western World. Gibraltar has justified cause to join in these celebrations having played a role of vital strategic importance during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

Last year I reported the acceptance by Government of the Trust's proposal to erect a statue of Lord Nelson. The Calpe 2005 Conference will be devoted to the theme Gibraltar and the Sea and I hope that the Trust will be able to contribute to the programme of John Mackintosh Hall talks, just as it has done this year. The Trust's 2005 Calendar, in the preparation of which Denis King played a major role, is devoted entirely the life of Nelson and is now available. Work has already begun on giving Trafalgar Cemetery another face-lift.

This restoration work is in the hands of Pepe Ballantine and Stanley Flower – who also directed the work carried out in Withams Cemetery and for which the Scouts were granted a Junior Heritage Award this evening. Individuals serving probation orders, supervised by Martin Ullger, carried out valuable repair work in the Cemetery, particularly on the tombstones, and a team from the Royal Navy also lent a hand. The Trust also saw to the restoration of the inscriptions on the two Trafalgar headstones. During the course of next year we hope to repair the edgings to paths, and clean and inscribe more headstones. The Royal Navy team has repaired one of the gates and has promised to assist further by replacing the worn out cemetery plans.

Betty Parkinson, who in the past has been a very generous benefactor of the Trust, could not have chosen a more appropriate time to make a further donation of £3,000 for the specific purpose of creating a rose arbour in memory of her late husband George, who loved Gibraltar and was himself a generous and committed supporter of the Trust. The structural ironwork is in place and plans are in hand to plant the red and white roses which that ironwork will support so that they will be at their best next year.

5. RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENT

One can hardly accuse the Minister of ignoring the Trust when so far this year he has granted it £21,000 in support of its work. But the Trust's proper interaction with the Minister and the Heritage Division transcends the receiving of grants, however munificent. Preserving and fostering Gibraltar's heritage is not just the concern of Government. It is, or should be, a

matter of vital interest to every citizen and it is the recognition of that fact that constitutes the very rationale of the Heritage Ordinance.

If the general public and particularly the Trust's membership, which now numbers well over 600, are denied any say or influence in the management of our heritage then the Ordinance is failing in its purpose. And by not insisting on proper consultation in all matters relating to heritage, in order to keep that membership informed, the Trust would be failing in its duty.

I fully appreciate that the past year has been a very busy one for the Minister, whose portfolio encompasses a wide range of duties. The Trust, moreover, enjoys excellent personal relations with members of the Heritage Division. It is disturbing, therefore, to report that during the past year there has been a dearth of consultation and communication between the Trust and the Division. Ironically, during the past year the Trust has interacted more with other Departments of Government than with the Heritage Division.

This lack of consultation is most damaging in respect of the plethora of illegal building works which insidiously erode the historical fabric of our city. In the past, because of the lack of financial and manpower resources, the Trust has been content to leave the enforcement of the Heritage Ordinance to the Division, never consenting, however, to surrender its ultimate responsibility.

In fact, in the case of two notorious examples of the violation of the terms of the Ordinance, the Trust insisted, in the time of the previous Minister, that legal proceedings should be instituted in order to enforce compliance. Sad to relate those violations have not been redressed and the threatened court actions appear to have evaporated. The Working Group which was set up at the time to address this problem came to nothing. In future the Trust must be prepared to exercise more directly those powers with which it is still legally empowered.

I bring this issue of lack of proper communication to the notice of the Minister and of this Meeting in the confident expectation that once this Tercentenary year is past and its extra duties fulfilled, our former cooperation will be resumed.

6. MY THANKS

The Trust enjoys the good will of many in our community and it is my pleasure to acknowledge this assistance. I wish to thank Gibtelecom for its continuing sponsorship of the Heritage Journal. Journal Number 11, edited by Paul Baker, and which is almost entirely devoted to the capture and early years of British Gibraltar's existence, has now been published and will shortly be on sale. I thank Jimmy Imossi of Gibnet for providing the Trust with free Internet access. This year I have special reason to thank Nick Keeling and Gabrielle O'Hagan, of DentonWildeSapte, for their legal advice and assistance. It is also a pleasure to thank Mr Streatfield-James, the Managing Director of Barclays Bank, who donated £700.00 to the Trust, raised as a result of the Heritage Treasure Hunt organised by Isobel and Stanley.

I thank Major David Seed for always bearing the Trust in mind when servicemen and cadets come out to Gibraltar as part of their training. We always have something for them to do and it is through their efforts that major tasks on sites like Parson's Lodge are accomplished. This year we were especially fortunate in the visit of the Topographical Unit of the Royal Engineers

under the command of Major Fryer and we are appreciative of all the work the Unit carried out for the Trust, which included detailed contour mapping of the Parson's Lodge site as well as measuring the height of the Rock with unimaginable accuracy.

I also wish to thank all the members of the Board of Trustees for their support and hard work. I have not mentioned them all by name nor listed every single task accomplished, but I must mention Brenda who really keeps the Trust functioning and works far more hours than those for which she is paid and Roy Harding, whose services as Honorary Treasurer the Trust is most fortunate to have acquired, for he offers it the expertise and dedication of a committed professional.

I am also glad to see that Paco Galliano is among us once again and cannot but admire the fortitude with which he bore his long indisposition. I thank the general membership of the Trust for its support and the confidence that it has shown in the Board. Numbers have been steadily increasing over the last seven years and now stand at the highest level for a decade.

After having, in the past, urged members to stand for election to the Board of Trustees, I suspect that this evening we will have more candidates than the four seats on the Board that fall vacant – which is another criterion of increasing interest in the Trust.

After this Meeting I shall be stepping down as Chairman, although I remain a nominated Trustee at least until April 2006. Being Chairman has, in fact, been an interesting and at times exhilarating experience. The past five years have flown by and I thank you all for your support. It is the prerogative of the Board to choose the next Chairman and Vice-Chairman, and I am certain that the Trust will be in safe hands.

Before I depart, however, I wish to lay the ghost of those guns which for so long remained unnoticed on the Gun Wharf but were only missed after the Trust had attempted but failed to salvage them. Firstly, they were not as rare as has been made out. Secondly, they were in very poor condition. Thirdly, there were never any exchanges between the Chief Minister and myself over this matter. The report of a rift between the Trust and the Chief Minister carried three weeks ago in a local newspaper is, therefore, a total fabrication and utter rubbish.