

THE CITY OF LONDON SOLICITORS' COMPANY



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Incoming Master's Statement at the Annual General Meeting on 15th June 2020

Fellow Solicitors

Introduction

It is a great honour to have been elected by the Court to serve as Master of this Livery Company for the coming year.

At the risk of underlining the obvious... this is a year with a difference.... and today at this our first on line AGM in the Company's history, I have the honour of becoming not just - the next Master of this Worshipful Company - but its first virtual Master. I very much look forward to taking substance later on in this year - hopefully after the Summer so the Company, the Court and our numerous committees can meet as usual and we can resume our customary programme of events. More of that later.

Outgoing Master

First it is my pleasant duty to congratulate the outgoing Master, fellow competition lawyer and friend, John Wotton on the excellent way he has led the Company over the last year. He has organised a series of highly successful and enjoyable events including one of the last major Banquets in Mansion House before the lockdown.

Very much in evidence was the quietly confident and efficient way he has chaired our Court meetings and the strong and wise leadership he has provided to the Company - skills no doubt honed by his past experience as President of the national Law Society. They have served the Company well in these difficult times.

The latter part of his year have thrown up an unprecedented challenge in the shape of COVID19 (and one which we still are having to cope with today). But he has had the foresight and wisdom, in association with our Honorary Solicitor, John Young, to ensure that the workings of the Company have seamlessly moved on line and that all necessary decisions of the Company have been taken in an appropriate and timely way.

Last but not least he has also led a highly impressive campaign to boost charitable giving within the Company and I am sure this will be seen as one of the hallmarks of his successful year as Master.

New Wardens

We also today welcome new Wardens, Tony King and Sarah De Gay, and I look forward to working with them and the Clerk, Linzi James and all the team at 4 College Hill to ensure that despite the current present situation we continue to serve our Members and will do our utmost to ensure that we return to business as usual as soon as feasibly possible.

So what does the year ahead have in store for the Company?

In normal times our programme of Company events and the challenges /issues the Company faces such as resources, serving our ever increasing and progressively diverse membership and increasing our Charitable funds would be fairly predictable. But not so this year. So let me say a few words on each.

Company events

While the lockdown and the restrictions on public gatherings remain in place, the Company will continue to operate and reach out to its Members online. Committee meetings and Court meetings will continue to be held online and our weekly virtual drinks parties for all members will remain a fixture. The Master and Wardens together with the Clerk will continue to meet fortnightly via Zoom.

If conventional events remain out of the question in the longer term we may have to adapt our programme to suit an online world. Certain events such as the seminars and webinars planned can be accommodated and I would wish to supplement these with a possible inaugural Master's lecture with a high profile outside speaker which would be open to not just members of the Company but also the wider Livery as well.

I will also use a periodic Zoom call to keep Members up to date with the affairs of the Company.

However looking optimistically ahead the earliest we are likely to host physical events will be late September This might be subject to change in line with Government Guidelines.

At the present time we plan to hold a function at Trinity House at the end of September. If the Tower and St Peter Ad Vincula are open we will have our normal company service and dinner. However, if not, we will use this event to hold a celebratory lunch to mark 500th Court Meeting.

We also hope to schedule on another date an EGM to ratify the decisions of our online AGM and hold the usual champagne reception and outgoing Masters Dinner.

The Whittington, Membership, Livery Committee and the Wine Committees are brimming over with ideas for functions which I hope we will be able to hold in Autumn and later on in the coming year.

To name but a few we have the second Ethics seminar scheduled for October carrying on the excellent work of Past Master and Treasurer Rupert Jones, Senior Warden Tony King and Junior Warden Sarah de Gay through the Membership Committee. There will be a rescheduled in house lawyer recruitment event originally planned for March. The Wine Committee remains active not only in selecting excellent wine for us to drink at our functions but they are also planning a repeat of the successful wine tasting held last year at Guildhall. We also hope there is be a day trip to vineyard in Sussex in the Spring.

We are also planning a recital in aid of our Charitable Fund to be given by my wife, Rebecca, accompanied by Richard Salter QC, (husband of Steward Ginny Cannon) in a central London venue followed by a drinks reception. I do hope you will be able to enthusiastically support this event.

As you know the present Lord Mayor and the Sheriffs have had their period of office extended by further year due to the pandemic. So Alderman and Liveryman Vincent Keaveny will not now become Lord Mayor until the year 2021-22. There will, I understand, still be a Lord Mayor's Show this November. However it will be slightly different format. As usual the Company will take part in the Show. The focus for our participation will be a celebratory thank you to key workers who have worked so valiantly dealing with the virus. The Whittington Committee aided by Administrator, Liz Thomas, are working hard on the design of the costumes for our group of walkers.

On 1st December we have Livery Dinner in Goldsmith Hall, a stunning hall to which we have not been for several years. Being the home of the goldsmith's craft..... lots of bling is guaranteed!

Details of our guest speaker will be announced nearer the time. I do hope as many of you as possible will be able to attend as this is likely to be our first major formal event post lockdown.

We also hope that our Banquet will go ahead as usual in the Spring. While we are uncertain as to what effect the lockdown will have on the diary at Mansion House we are hopeful that we will retain our usual March slot and the Clerk is liaising with Mansion House to secure this.

This year was a year of no Masters Weekend.

But next year could feature the possibility of two. But first playing catch up I think it is important we hold the Master's Weekend in Cornwall which the Outgoing Master and the Clerk put such a lot of effort and imagination into organising and which regrettably had to be cancelled in May this year. Both John and I agree that Cornwall and its gardens are arguably at their best in Spring and therefore we hope to reschedule this trip in April 2021. There is then the possibility of a further Master's Weekend with a more international flavour later on in the year depending upon whether we have our liberty by then.

I hope you will be able to support these events.

Resources

The staff at College Hill have been working remotely since March and continue to do so. I would like to say a particular thank you to the Clerk, Linzi James, and all the staff at College Hill for continuing to keep the Company's affairs ticking over so smoothly despite the difficult circumstances. I remain committed to getting the office up and running and open again as soon as we can when it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Membership & Charitable Giving

Membership is the live blood of the Company and an important source of income in terms of subscriptions and charitable giving. Therefore the more members we have the better - we can set out our stall as representative of the profession and the more financially adventurous we can be in advancing our charitable objects and organising events for our members.

I hope to build on the Outgoing Master's excellent record in boosting donations to our charitable fund in the coming year. However I am conscious this is likely to be a difficult year for many people as the effects of the coronavirus continue to make themselves felt. However I will be writing to members asking those of you that can to support the charity or to increase your support by regular donations and by legacy so that we can make a real impact on helping to uphold the rule of law..... advancing social mobility..... and combating injustice.

Now and in future years we need to redouble our efforts on the charitable front so we can hold our own against many other companies in the Livery.

On Membership we remain committed to continuing to expand the appeal of the Company to an ever wider group of solicitors in the future. As at 30th May 2020 we had 413 liverymen and 1260 freeman in the Company - an increase on past years. The Membership and Livery Committees under the able leadership of Senior Warden Tony King and Assistant Mary Ann Wright continue to promote the advantages and appeal of membership to solicitors in the City of London through a series of events.

However we are aware that the character and background of our potential new membership is changing along with the profession as a whole. We, therefore, need to be as welcoming as possible to members from different backgrounds who would not hitherto have regarded membership of the Company as an obvious choice.

The Membership Committee and our EDI advisory group are currently considering what steps we, as a Company, could usefully make to project our image as a welcoming and all-inclusive institution to encourage further membership growth. This is particularly relevant given recent events.

I will be reporting back to you more fully once their recommendations have been finalised.

I look forward to your support in the coming year.

Thank you.

Robert Bell
Master