

Report to the 2025 Annual General Meeting of The Arts Society Oxford

Chair's Annual Report 2025

At the end of my first year as Chair, I am delighted to introduce this report from the Trustees. The Society continues to flourish with a full membership, and a full programme of events.

There are so many people I need to thank – on your behalf as members – some of whom devote a substantial amount of their time to the smooth-running of the Society, others who provide support in less time-consuming ways but who nevertheless make an important contribution.

First, our Programme Coordinators who put together the lecture programme, send out contracts, and liaise with the lecturers. The 2024-25 programme was drawn together by David Stern and Erica Kendall. Topsy Murray and Sue Pfunder took over as programme coordinators last September, and have been responsible for coordinating the running of the lectures this year. Topsy and Sue have put together the programme for the coming year, and have already done much of the planning for 2026-27. By planning well ahead, we can ensure that we secure some of the best lecturers who become booked up a long way in advance.

Our Study Day team has been ably led for several years by Sue Hine, supported by Bridget Watkins and Ann Bevan. Between them, they select and propose Study Day lecturers and topics, contract the lecturers, negotiate with Rewley House, and take responsibility for the running of the day. The result this year has been three fascinating and well-attended Study Days – my thanks to all three of you.

The Visits team had a change of leadership partway through the year when Steve Rogers had to step down for personal reasons. Fortunately, Alison Madden agreed to return to lead the team once again, and to follow through on the visits that Steve set up. Steve and Alison have been supported throughout the year by Trudy Coe, Anne Margo and Diana Martin, joined later in the year by Fiona Eddlestone. As a team, they plan where to visit, work out the logistics, make bookings and run the events. This year, they have delivered a varied programme of visits ranging from local walks to a residential trip to Liverpool for which they also deserve our thanks – Steve and Alison in particular.

Early in the year, Janice Giffen took over leadership of our Community Arts Projects committee from Liz West. The committee (Janice Giffen, Judith Argles, Glyn Benson and Sue Butterworth) meet to assess applications from local organisations for our small grants, and to make recommendations to the Trustees for funding. I am enormously grateful to them for the careful work they do in researching the organisations and making sure they have a real understanding of where our limited funds will have the most impact.

Behind the scenes, our Vice-chair Ray Wright, Treasurer Cathy Knowles and Secretary Jean Hindmarch assist in all kinds of ways with the smooth running of the Society as a whole. They have all provided great support to me over the past year, and without such able and enthusiastic people in these roles the Society would cease to function as it does.

As our summer renewal season draws to a close, we owe a debt of gratitude to our Membership Secretary, Kim de Keijzer, who has juggled an international house move, her daughter's A-level results, and much else without losing sight of whether we had or had not paid our subscriptions. The role of Membership Secretary is largely seasonal, and throughout the rest of the year Kim has coordinated volunteers for registration and tea/coffee before lectures, as well as introducing occasional treats (biscuits and chocolates) as part of our drive to become a more welcoming Society.

Regardless of our role in the Society, we all work with our Communications team. Rumi Ringshall oversees all our mailings - coordinating, cajoling and reminding, as well as editing text and sending the emails out. Stuart Newstead posts information on our website, and assists with access to our Gmail account. Thank you both for the considerable contributions you make.

Of course, in thanking people by name there is always the risk of leaving someone out - if I have done so, my apologies. And finally, I'd like to thank you, our members, whether you have helped out before lectures, registering attendees, making coffee or washing up, you have made a valuable contribution.

Challenges

One of the issues for the Society is that our membership is limited by the capacity of Magdalen College Auditorium. Over the past few years, we have looked at various other options for lectures, and Magdalen still seems the best (affordable) option. This means that we continue to run a waiting list.

Despite the limit on membership, our membership numbers are large - up to about 520. This presents challenges in terms of providing additional activities for members, particularly visits. The uptake for additional activities is variable and difficult to predict in advance. In recent years, we have used a system where booking opens at an advertised time. This has resulted in a rush of bookings with some events selling out very quickly. Finding an alternative way of doing this, without creating a lot of extra work, is something that the Trustees will be considering over the coming months.

Of course, providing additional activities such as Visits, Study Days and other events is dependent on having people who are prepared to volunteer their time to organise and provide the administrative support for them. Despite the large membership, recruiting volunteers to serve as Trustees, to organise visits and social events, and even to take responsibility for organising rotas for coffee and registration has proved difficult. In the end, the amount we can do is limited by the amount of people, time and energy we have available.

Many of the Trustees take on additional ad hoc tasks outside their role. For example, Topsy and Rumi have set up and run some very successful local coffee mornings which we plan to hold on a more regular basis in the coming year. Topsy and Rumi have been generous enough to volunteer their time, but you do not need to be a Trustee to do this. Over the next few months, we will be looking at ways of encouraging more of you, our members, to become actively involved with the Society, providing ideas and enthusiasm, and sharing the tasks. If you would like to be involved, even in a small way, please do email us at tasoxford@gmail.com. Working with others is a good way of getting to know new people - and it can even be enjoyable!

Ruth Burdett, Chair

Treasurer's Report

TASO's total income for the year was £43,812 (2023: £42,298). This consists mainly of member subscriptions and gift-aided subscriptions, which appear in the accounts as donations of £25,580) and payments by members to go on Visits and Study Days (£18,158).

Total expenditure was £43,219 (2023: £42,706). The major items of expenditure were the cost of the lectures (£11,991) and Visit and Study Day costs (£16,676) and our payment to TAS, our national parent body (£7,990). This has resulted in a small surplus for the year ending June 30th 2025 of £598.

Overall, the Society's funds have increased slightly from £26,933 to £27,526. This is still greater than required by our current reserves policy, which is to keep reserves equivalent to six months' expenditure, that is, approximately £22,000.

Cathy Knowles, Treasurer

Membership Report

Membership levels have remained strong this year, maintaining our full capacity of 520. Any vacancies that arose due to resignations were quickly filled from the waiting list. Notably, we began the year with virtually no one waiting to join, and by the end of the year we again had a significant waiting list.

We are currently in the midst of our annual renewal period, and expect to be up to full strength, possibly still with a waiting list, by the time of the AGM.

Our membership base remains more than sufficient to support a vibrant and dynamic society — one that is financially sound and able to continue bringing in top-tier lecturers. Your trustees remain fully confident in our ability to keep membership strong and steady into the future.

Kim de Keijzer, Membership Secretary

Programme Secretaries' Report

When a lecture programme is designed, it aims to look at a broad interpretation of the arts. In 2024/25 there were lectures on the Stained Glass of the Sainte-Chappelle in Paris, The Shakers with their architecture and furniture design, the luxury fashions and fabrics of Veronese in 17 Century Venice, and Music from the Latin American Baroque. The art form of Pantomime entertained us at Christmas. Art was not neglected, and we learnt about 'Les Trois Grandes Dames' of Impressionism, Trees in Art, and Seeking Essence: Primitivism. A combination of music and art was a lecture that linked Handel and Rembrandt. Perhaps the best combination of all the arts came in our lecture on the Art and Craft of the polymath, John Piper.

Following each lecture, an evaluation is conducted and comments invited. This information on the quality of the lectures and the standard of the lecturers is fed back to The Arts Society, and provides a useful guide to help us plan future programmes. The number of responses averages about two-thirds of the audience of each session which gives us an excellent view of how well the lecture was received, and we are grateful to the responders for their prompt feedback. We are delighted to report very

high satisfaction scores with the 2024/25 lecture programme which was drawn up by Erica Kendall and David Stern, and we would like to thank them for their hard work.

Audience numbers at our venue at Magdalen College averaged around 120 for each morning and afternoon session, sometimes more but never less than 100.

Sue Pfunder and Topsy Murray took over the programme planning in 2024 and have designed next year's lecture programme. There are 372 accredited lecturers, most of whom offer at least 5-10 lecture topics, so choosing 10 for a TASO year is no easy task! The programme for 2025/26 was circulated with the membership renewal letter and is now available on the website. We will be visiting the arts from Peru to Russia via Glasgow, looking at the works of the Vikings and the designs of May and William Morris, and learning about game-changing operas. We will puzzle over double portraits and be mystified by magic. Finally, we will be celebrating the 300th anniversary of John Constable with two recently rediscovered portraits. We hope that there will be something for everyone, and even if you are not quite sure if you fancy the topic, come along anyway – you will learn something new!

Topsy Murray, Programme Secretary

Study Days Team Report

During 2024-5, we organised three study days, keeping to the September/January/May format of recent years.

September 2024 brought **The Paintings Conservation Roadshow** with Sarah Cove. Sarah gave two excellent lectures in the morning, illustrating both the techniques and materials of oil painting over the centuries, and her work as a conservator/restorer of damaged and decaying oil paintings. After lunch, she examined thirteen paintings brought in by members, and gave advice on their conservation and restoration. The evaluations of the day were very enthusiastic (92% rated it Outstanding or Excellent), with most attendees particularly enjoying the interactive afternoon session.

In January 2025, we heard from Chris Aslan about **Unravelling the Silk Road**, with separate lectures on **The Wool, Silk and Cotton Roads**. Chris was knowledgeable and engaging, and gave us a fascinating day, recounting his personal experiences of living and working in the area. The images used and the fabrics on display were all colourful and inspirational, and the day was much appreciated by the audience, 83% of whom rated it as Outstanding or Excellent.

Our third study day in May was entitled **Moorish Spain: History, Architecture and Material Culture** with Ian Cockburn. Ian was a knowledgeable and clear lecturer and his subject matter concerning Moorish Spain between 711 and 1492 AD was very interesting. The three lectures covered History and Architecture, Material Culture and The Alhambra. The audience was very appreciative, despite a rather brief afternoon lecture; in their evaluations, 56% rated the study day as Outstanding or Excellent.

The study days planned for 2025-6 are **Caravaggio and His Contemporaries** with Chantal Brotherton-Ratcliffe on 24 September, **Photography: The Big Picture** with Roger Mendham on 13 January, and **Istanbul: City of Faith, Power and Beauty** with Antonia Gatward Cevizli on 22 May.

We continue to use Rewley House as our venue. The facilities are very good, and we are provided with mid-morning refreshments and an excellent buffet lunch, followed by coffee, which help make the day an enjoyable social as well as cultural event.

Bridget Watkins, Ann Bevan and Sue Hine were the Study Day team in 2024-2025. Please step forward if you could join us – we need new volunteers and it's an enjoyable role and not too much like hard work!

Sue Hine, Study Days

Visits Team Report

First and most importantly, huge thanks to all the Visits Team volunteers: Steve Rogers, who so enthusiastically led the team from 2022, Anne Margo, Diana Martin and Trudy Coe. Fiona Eddleston joined the team in early spring 2025. Sadly, Steve had to withdraw in late 2024 for personal reasons.

This year the Visits Team offered an eclectic programme for TASO members, supporting both Oxford-related subjects and those further afield.

Victoria Bentata led four walks exploring Literary Oxford, there were talks for members at the Annual Exhibition of Wood Engravers and the Oxford Printmakers' Cooperative, a visit to nearby Shotover House and grounds with delightful hosts Alex and Camilla Stanier, and visits to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies.

Two coach trips proved popular, one to Cookham with interesting tours of the Stanley Spencer Gallery and the John Lewis Heritage Centre, the other to Coventry for a guided tour of the Cathedral as well as the chance to visit the city gallery and museum. Another treat was the fascinating behind-the-scenes tour of the Royal Albert Hall in London.

Two theatre trips were arranged, one to a play at the little-known Jermyn Street theatre in London, and the other to a ballet in Birmingham. As take-up-of tickets was low, no further such trips will be on the programme.

The residential trip in May to Liverpool, with visits to museums and galleries en route, was much enjoyed by those who went, with interest expressed in other UK venues.

Many members will know about the trip arranged to Sicily in March 2026. Sue Hine, from the Study Days team, and I worked on this for several months, and are pleased to report that it is fully booked.

Generally, we are a small team of volunteers who devote considerable time setting up and managing the events offered. We are always really pleased when we hear that they are enjoyed.

Making bookings via TicketSource has reduced the time we spend on ticketing substantially. We hope members appreciate that we have no control over who gets tickets! We operate a waiting list only for visits by coach, as the extra work involved in running a waiting list can be very time-consuming for the team.

Finally, we are always keen to receive members' ideas for visits, walks and residential trips, and to welcome new members on the team. If anyone would like to suggest ideas or indeed join the Visits Team, please send an email to tasovisits@gmail.com

Alison Madden, Visits Team leader (December 2024 – present)

Community Arts Projects Report

Whilst in previous years there have been two rounds of funding per year for local Community Arts Projects, in September and March, due to uncertainties about the TASO budget the Trustees decided that there would not be a funding round in September 2024. By March the CAP committee was informed that there would be £2,500 available for small grants this year. We received 9 applications requesting a total of over £14,000 to fund a variety of projects. Several of the applicants were from organisations which we have funded in the past. We were also pleased to see applications from organisations which are new to us. Our guidelines state TASO will fund any individual organisation for a maximum of £2,000 within any two-year period.

The committee recommended that TASO provide grants to two of the 9 projects. We decided not to split the funding to allow more organisations to receive some funds, since small amounts do not make much difference to large organisations with access to other funds. The grants we offer can make a big difference to small organisations without fundraising departments.

The two projects we have funded this year are:

Body Politic

We awarded Body Politic £1320 to support their summer camps – two weeks of dance, creative arts and physical activity for young people ages 7–18, one to be held at Barton School and the other at Pegasus Theatre. TASO funding will help fund free places (50% of total) for children in receipt of free school meals. The young people will be offered a range of activities including hip-hop dance moves and routines, break dancing, screen printing, tie-dying, and fitness sessions. Hot meals and snacks are provided as part of the camp.

Each camp ends with an 'end of camp performance' for parents and carers to witness their young people showcase their newly acquired skills and confidence. In previous years, Body Politic has received funding from Oxford City Council towards the cost of these summer camps, but was expecting this funding to be reduced this year. Each camp accommodates 25 young people, most of whom attend for the full week, although some come just for one day. Camps are divided into two groups, 7-11 and 12-18, to ensure appropriate levels of activities and support.

Oxford Urban Wildlife Group

We awarded Oxford Urban Wildlife Group £1,180. TASO funding was to enable the running of 8 workshop sessions from end April to June 2025, 4 on Boundary Brook Nature Reserve in East Oxford and 4 within local community centres. Each workshop planned to host around 30 participants with the Urban Wildlife group working with their partners Donnington Doorstep Family Centre, Friends of Larkrise School parent group, Rose Hill Community Centre Allotment Group and the Children's Allotment.

The funding was to be used for materials, room hire, community travel needs and artist fees to run art and nature sessions for groups of young people and their families, connecting the local community more closely with the natural world in the urban environment. All sessions were planned to focus on aspects of important ecological habitats and species significant to the local area and to explore aspects of life cycle, seasonality, place and time. The art sessions would offer ways for local people to build confidence, self-expression and understanding of nature and their own creativity. The funding would also be used to create a final community art piece to be displayed permanently in the nature reserve in the new woodland shelter that is being constructed.

TASO is the sole funder of this project which has been completed. Visits have been made and an evaluation report is under way.

Janice Giffen, CAP