



FEBRUARY UPDATE FROM THE TRUSTEES OF THE LEIGH AND BRANSFORD MEMORIAL HALL

Reflections and Projections – Looking Back and Looking Forward

The start of any new year is often the time we look back over the year just ended (reflection) and look forward, with hope, to the year ahead (projection).

In many ways, 2023 was the year your trustees made a determined effort to **increase and improve access** to the Hall in various ways.

As the year began, we knew that our priority was to keep Hall hire fees affordable for everyone, despite the serious inflationary pressures being experienced at the time. The Hall's running costs were rising exponentially, mainly due to the soaring price of electricity, so the decision to install over 20 solar panels and storage batteries two months earlier was a key part of our strategy. We estimated that they would almost halve our energy costs over a year, which in turn enabled us to keep any hire fee increases to a bare minimum – and certainly well below inflation.

It was therefore pleasing to see, as the year progressed, that not only did the number of hires steadily increase, but also the numbers of people accessing the Hall.

But improving access is not just about increasing numbers, it's also about making sure that users of the Hall can have the best experience. We'd known for some time that as beautiful as the Hall's polished wood floors are, the combined effect of high ceilings and hard floors meant that acoustics were often poor. Two of our trustees have acquired hearing loss and so championed the installation of specially designed acoustic ceiling panels in the Small Hall. These have made a tremendous difference to sound quality and this improvement should also now encourage more people with hearing loss to access the building. The panels are expensive to buy and to fit, so funds last year were only sufficient to install them in the Small Hall, but *looking forward*, our intention is to fit them in the large hall as soon as funds allow.

Following on from this, we also knew that wheelchair users accessing the Large Hall via the outside ramp, were finding the small threshold step by the double doors a real problem – furthermore the ramp itself had no safety rail along its length. The solution was to remove the threshold step, drop the double doors so they were flush with the floor and install a suitably robust and weatherproof safety rail. The photograph below shows the completed work, and the 'dawn to dusk' automatic light situated above the nearby statue of Stanley, our Standing Soldier, ensures that the ramp is always lit during the hours of darkness.



We also gave free Wi-Fi access throughout the building at the start of last year – and even installed a dozen bird boxes in locations around the site to give our local bird population more access to safer nesting sites!

The year ended, as you can see from the main photograph, with dozens of locals accessing the annual, free Carols Round The Tree sing along, complete with hot drinks, warm mince pies and a visit from Santa for the children.

Sadly, however, in 2023 we bade farewell to two of our great hall supporters who died last year – Roger Husband and Pete King. And we also lost the talents of Steve Seymour who resigned as a trustee in December - our loss will be Sussex's gain. But we also welcomed two new trustees into the fold, Marie McNally and Peter Hawkins.

And so, to the promise of 2024 – and our theme of **Access** looks set to continue. At the end of March, we expect to have our new and improved website up and running. It will be much easier to navigate, especially if you access it on your mobile phone. It will also give you 24-hour access to a unique, 3D virtual tour of the Hall.

Finally, we are looking forward to welcoming at least 10 couples this year to the Hall for their wedding receptions – last year it was just 4. This is one more sure sign that our community is returning to its pre-Covid ways.

Well, here's to a healthy and hopeful 2024 - and I look forward to bringing you the Hall's monthly updates throughout the coming year.

Jon Gamble, Chair of Trustees