

ANNIVERSARY 125th



Kew
Society
Est. 1901

LET'S
CELEBRATE

The Kew Society Newsletter • Winter 2025-26

Welcome....

to our winter newsletter, we hope you had a wonderful Christmas and New Year and enjoyed all the events, including Kew Sparkle, in the Village. 2026 marks the 125th anniversary of the forerunner of The Kew Society, and we have many special celebrations planned in which we very much hope you will be take part.



Kew Green, around 1901

Celebrating 125 Years of The Kew Society

There can be no doubt that over the last 125 years Kew, and the lives of people who live here, has changed beyond recognition. At the turn of the last century, little of the technology we use today was available; communication in our neighbourhoods was more likely to be a smile and a wave or a chat at the shops, than a post on a street WhatsApp group. And yet, while many things have changed, there is much that remains constant about the place where we live – Kew Gardens, Kew Green, the river and the façades of many houses.

There are still a remarkably high number of families who have lived in Kew for generations or who have moved back 'home'

here. They often live alongside the many current residents who are 'first generation' ...people who have chosen to move to Kew because it is a wonderful place to live. Whatever your situation, we suspect there is a fair chance that you would enjoy discovering more about your family history and that you would welcome guidance about how to fill the gaps in your knowledge banks.

At the first of what we hope to be a series of events to celebrate our 125 year history, we will be hosting a special workshop, exclusively for our members, led by staff from the National Archives entitled *Getting Started in Family History*, where you will be guided in methods and techniques aimed at enabling you to unlock the treasure trove of information stored in the big (and, for many people, quite intimidating) building on our doorstep. Several members of our team are already looking forward to discovering whether some of their family stories are true... or partly true...or just myths.

Later in the year, we are hoping to host a special exhibition which – amongst other events of local interest (see overleaf) – will provide an overview of the history of the Kew Society, and what it has contributed for the benefit of local residents. From our early days as the 'Kew Union', which was formed to represent the interests of local ratepayers to the council, we have a long history of achievements, often gained as a result of the credibility we have with decision makers and other people of influence in the area.

Plans for the exhibition are still 'on the drawing board'...we would welcome volunteers (especially anyone with relevant experience) to join our team. We would like to make space to share some of the family stories that you uncover that could be of interest (or amusement!) to anyone who lives in Kew now.

Sarah Clarke, Shiona Williams and Trevor Whittaker

History of The Kew Society – can you help fill in the gaps?

We are hoping to include an article on the history of the Society in a future edition of the newsletter. The origins of the Society can be traced back to 1901 when the Kew Ward Union was established. For those of you who have lived in Kew for some time, do let us know of your earliest recollections of the Society, when you first joined and what activities you can recall. Do get in touch with Helen Bartolome at bartolohel@aol.com.

Our growing team...

Over the past few months, we have been delighted to welcome several new people to our executive team.... we will introduce them to you in our next newsletter... and the future of our charity now seems far more secure. Following the sudden death of our much missed colleague Diana Ormond, Krystyna Blackburn has volunteered to take over the role of Honorary Secretary, initially on an interim basis. Daniel Verwer will manage our membership and Damian Connelly will take the lead on planning and the built environment. Sarah Strelley is now working alongside Bettina Kaemmerer to help to organise our events, Katja Staple will lead on our gardening activities and... fingers crossed...I am very hopeful that we may have found a Co-Chair (Governance and Management) to work in partnership with me. [See "Stop Press"]

We have also welcomed a number of volunteers, including some very enthusiastic young people, to help with our events and environmental and gardening activities...always room for more...and are very grateful for their invaluable contribution.

So, things are certainly looking up! But we still need someone to coordinate all our communications... and, following the forthcoming retirement of Dr. Sarah Clarke, our Environment lead, we are looking for an individual to coordinate the activities of her team and to develop their own interests related to this important element of our portfolio. Do get in touch if you would like to find out more about these roles.

Happy New Year!

Shiona Williams, Co-Chair

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Developments at Heathrow

The long-debated proposal to build a third runway at Heathrow has recently moved into a more decisive phase after years of political uncertainty and planning delays. In November 2025, the UK government formally selected Heathrow Airport Ltd's (HAL) expansion plan as the preferred scheme to progress through the next stage of approval. This decision followed a review of multiple submissions and reflects the government's view that HAL's proposal is the "most credible and deliverable option" for expanding the UK's busiest airport.

The chosen plan features a 3,500-metre north-western runway, which would require the realignment of the M25 motorway, significant demolition of nearby properties, and extensive infrastructure work, including a new Terminal Five together with expanded cargo and passenger facilities. The government aims to secure planning permission by 2029, with the runway potentially operational by 2035. Heathrow's expansion proposal — a fully-privately financed project estimated to cost tens of billions — argues it will drive connectivity, increase capacity to around 150 million passengers

per year, boost trade and jobs, and enhance UK competitiveness without direct taxpayer funding.

However, the project remains controversial. Opponents, including the Richmond Heathrow Campaign (RHC) (of which The Kew Society is an active member) highlight environmental concerns, particularly potential impacts on air quality, noise and climate goals (not least from the increased local ground traffic), and stress the need for robust mitigation before approval. In particular, we note that airspace modernisation (to review outdated flight routes) has failed over the last 15 years and are concerned that lessons have not been learned. Moreover, we feel that the projected need for capacity growth is uncertain, and possibly relies more on Heathrow's desire to expand than airlines demands for greater capacity.

Noise from night flights is, for many residents, the most acute Heathrow issue. During the year, RHC made progress, opening the door to progressive deferral of night flights to the day. The DfT has now commissioned a study on the economics of night flights, taking account of the initiatives of RHC and others, with results expected early in 2026. Results from a night noise study and a noise/annoyance study are both

due in early 2026. A revised Airports National Policy Statement (ANPS) is expected in 2026, which will shape statutory planning criteria including environmental, economic and community considerations.

In summary, while the third runway’s pathway seems clearer than it has been in years, significant regulatory, environmental and community hurdles remain before construction can begin. Meanwhile, The Kew Society,

in conjunction with RHC, will continue to actively monitor developments and present the concerns of our local residents to the powers that be.

For further information, see www.richmondheathrowcampaign.org

Paul Bethel

Kew Railway Bridge Works Update

The Thames Towpath beneath Kew Railway Bridge has been undergoing essential repairs to improve safety and durability for runners and walkers. Years of river erosion, heavy foot traffic and weathering had left the surface uneven and prone to pooling water.

Kew Society’s Environment Trustee – Dr. Sarah Clarke – has been in touch with Network Rail, who informed her that, following a meeting with the structural engineers: “[They are] making good progress with the project to repair the bridge. The monitoring equipment, which was in place as part of the investigation has been removed, and we’re now in the process of analysing the findings. These findings aren’t available yet but when they are, they’ll guide our next steps.”

Recent works on the towpath have focused on

strengthening the path edge, resurfacing worn sections, and improving drainage to reduce flooding after high tides or heavy rain. While temporary closures and diversions have caused inconvenience for regular runners, the repairs will provide a smoother, safer route. Once completed, the upgraded towpath will better support daily use and preserve this popular riverside environment.



Paul Bethel

IMPROVING OUR GREEN SPACES

North Road Garden – stolen plants



Our volunteers at work



In December 2025, a number of special plants were stolen from North Road Garden which, has been very upsetting for the volunteers who tend that plot and more specifically for the members of the local community who donated the plants in remembrance of their loved ones. Some of the plants that we were able to identify were:

Two Euphorbias, one Erysimum (wall flower). There were other holes where plants had been dug up but, as we were not expecting them to be stolen, we did not keep an inventory. Furthermore, we had labelled most of the plants for users of the garden to identify and perhaps enjoy planting them in their gardens and for educational purposes. These labels have now been removed, hopefully to stop any further theft.

Bharti Hindocha

Towpath Reopened

We were all delighted to see that the Thames towpath has been reopened between Richmond Lock and Kew Gardens following the major repairs carried out over the last year. You will remember that these were necessitated by the collapse of the riverbank in October 2024. The new stretch was opened on 8th November 2025 at a celebration attended by residents, walking and cycling groups. The Council's Report shows how challenging the work was for the engineers:

- 25 metres of riverbank stabilised, including over 80 metres of sheet piling and protective scour matting
- 150 metres of towpath strengthened between the reinstated culvert and Richmond Lock
- More than 300 tonnes of material removed and over 900 tonnes brought in to repair erosion and safeguard against future collapse
- Work carried out with two specialist cranes and marine barges, operating around the tidal cycle
- Up to 30 skilled contractors and engineers on site at peak times

The restored section of the towpath now features strengthened riverbank structures, improved access, and new ecological measures to protect against future erosion while supporting biodiversity.

Claire Bethel



The Towpath Opening Ceremony



KeWI (Kew Women's Institute) Members enjoying the re-opened towpath on 22nd November 2025

Proposed change of use of the towpath

Members may be aware that the Council is proposing to adopt a Towpath (Movement) Strategy (TMS) in relation to the Council's management of the Thames Towpath within the Borough.

At a meeting of the Transport and Air Quality Committee (chaired by Cllr. Alexander Ehmann) held on 8th December 2025, the draft TMS was discussed at Item 6 of the agenda. We recommend that you read the agenda item and agenda report seen via this link. <https://cabnet.richmond.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=500001263> The report and associated papers summarise the considerations and background to the legal status of the towpath, the proposals and the policy implications.

We do not intend to go into great detail about the proposals but thought that our members would wish to be aware of these developments. There is currently no notice of consultations on the Council website.

The TMS, the report states, emanates from a manifesto commitment published in 2022 to develop plans "to

improve and enhance the Thames Towpath". The Committee:

- noted the draft TMS, the changes to legal status and invited comments to the draft TMS;
- authorised officers to undertake public engagement on the draft strategy to inform the final TMS for adoption;
- approved changes to the public right of way legal status to a "restricted byway" which it was said would formalise existing usage of the Thames Towpath and access route;
- proposed that officers form a Towpath Board to oversee towpath management and report back to the Committee as each aspect progresses.

The TMS is said to be intended to complement other Council Departments' work, and to work in partnership with, for example, the Thames Landscape Strategy, the Port of London Authority and the Environment Agency.

The report summarises the policy implications of the

TMS, noting that adoption of the TMS “will support delivery of the Mayor of London’s Transport Strategy and Vision Zero, also directly support the Council’s key policies and priorities around a safer and greener road encourage [sic] active travel”.

It is intended that the public will be consulted on certain aspects – it seems that there will be consultation on the draft TMS and consultation on the change to the legal status of the towpath to become a restricted byway (although the committee approved the changes to the legal status and authorised officers to begin the process). The Council announces the consultation on its website.

Looking briefly and generally at the proposed legal status of the towpath, the current legal status of most of the towpath (part of the Thames Path) is that of a public right of way on foot. Anyone who walks the path is aware that cyclists also use it. The situation regarding use other than on foot is complicated but generally is not a right. Cycle use is not under a public right of way, but neither is it an offence – a strange, almost “blind eye” situation. The report states that rights may, however, have been acquired through usage or otherwise.

The Committee has approved that officers start the process to change the legal status to “a restricted byway”. The agenda report defines this as “a public right of way that allows public access for walking, horse riding, and using non-mechanically propelled vehicles like bicycles and horse-drawn carriages. Mechanically propelled vehicles such as cars and motorbikes are prohibited, with the exception of those using mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs, or in cases where prior vehicular rights existed.”

The report goes on to note that electronically assisted ‘road legal’ pedal cycles (EAPC), with power output less than 250W and electrical assistance cut-off at 15.5mph, are classified as bicycles and not motorised vehicles, so would be included in this public right of



way. Thus, lawful electric cycles will be covered. How the path will then be managed, for example, how wide it should be, what materials should cover it, etc. may will be subject to consultation. The report also has a section on *Managing User Conflict (Interaction)*, anticipating interaction between pedestrians and cyclists.

Certain measures are suggested including “clear signage showing what type of usage is permitted” and that “pedestrians have priority over other types of users”. The report notes that delivery of proposed measures in the once-adopted TMS will depend on funding. It is intended that the TMS will be used as a way to secure future funding. At a Police Liaison Group meeting on 15th January, Cllr. Vollum said that the change in legal status will give access to more funding available for cycle ways.

The Towpath is a massive part of our Kew heritage and environment. It is important to find out what proposals there are for changing and managing it so that it continues to be a vital part of not only Kew but the whole borough.

Alice Shackleton



Wrong Tree Cut Down

Residents of Priory Road in Kew were left devastated after a healthy, mature and very beautiful cherry tree (shown left) was mistakenly cut down by contractors, leaving only a stump (shown right, and subsequently removed altogether). Premier Tree Care & Conservation removed the tree after confusing it with a street of the same name in Ealing (correct tree shown below).



Neighbours tried to stop the felling, questioning the workers’ claim that the tree was diseased, but it was cut down within minutes. The company admitted the error, apologised, and promised to replace the tree with a similar cherry. Richmond Council said the felling was unauthorised, and costs would be recovered from the contractor.

Paul Bethel



CONNECTING OUR COMMUNITY

Habitats & Heritage

Regular sessions

Habitats & Heritage are hoping that you're full of resolve for improving your health, meeting new people and giving back to your community and local environment – and they have the solution for you! They have set up the Ha-ha volunteer dates for the year to make it easier for you to plan your nature conservation volunteering. It's basically the third Saturday of every month with an R in its name. The exception is March, when there is an unavoidable clash – this will be on the fourth Saturday.

IMPORTANT - please sign up to our volunteer hub

As a charity, we are now running several volunteering projects. In order to communicate better and increase the safety of volunteers, we have set up a new platform to organise these volunteer days. Once registered, it's really easy for you to receive updates from us on the Ha-ha sessions, and this enables you to book your places with minimal fuss. Please follow the link below to register and then sign up to the sessions you would like to attend. From now on – communication about upcoming volunteer sessions at the Ha-ha will use this platform. Please do sign up at

<https://HabitatsandHeritage.teamkinetic.co.uk/volunteers/opportunity/10264205>

- offer opportunities to learn how to repair and reuse our things so that we reduce waste, and consumption
- promote planting that supports biodiversity, and build vibrant community spaces for sharing our ideas
- bring their communities together to form a shared vision of what a greener, greater, more planet-friendly world could look like.

Repair & Share



7th March, 10.30am – 1.30 pm

St. Luke's Church, The Avenue, TW9 2AJ

Once again, our friendly team of volunteer 'repairers' will offer their time and advice to help our community have a go at reviving broken items – these can range from small electricals (no microwaves please) to cherished toys. We also offer a warm, welcoming space to have a chat about what our group can do next to build community resilience and share our visions of Kew's future, over some home-baked banana bread. We hope these free, fun events provide a learning experience for our visitors, showing them how easy it is to keep the things we buy working, to reduce waste, and to enjoy making things last longer!

Kew the Transition

Transition is a movement of communities coming together to reimagine and rebuild our world. There are now groups in nearly 50 countries, in thousands of communities. With the aim of creating a low-carbon, socially just future we are crowd-sourcing local solutions to big global problems, such as climate change, food insecurity, and the need to end our use of fossil fuels.

Transition groups do things like:

- create community gardens and markets to re-localise the food chain
- establish shared libraries of things so that people can share seldom-used or expensive tools or equipment

Kew Mutual Improvement Society

We specialise in providing a platform for education and discussion centred on horticulture and botany. Founded in 1871 by Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, the society focuses on Educational Public Lectures, Student Professional Development and Expert Knowledge Sharing.

Recent lecture topics have included Urban Landscapes, Conservation Horticulture, Insights from Kew's Fungarium on the importance of fungi, and Plant Exploration – accounts of botanical expeditions and the study of native flora worldwide.

There are too many lectures to list here; but for a comprehensive list, together with detailed descriptions of each, see <https://www.kmis.org.uk/>

Pensford Field & Dose of Nature



Many of our members have asked for an update on the future environmental management of this special public space in the heart of Kew.

The lease for future use and management of the field and the studio has now been formally transferred to Dose of Nature – a registered charity established to promote the mental health benefits that can be gained through engagement with the natural world. The charity offers a mix of professional support to young people (16+) and adults, which includes one-to-one support and a range of workshops. Take a look at their website to find out more on www.doseofnature.org.uk

Dr. Alison Greenwood – the Founder and CEO of Dose of Nature – has given us the following information.

“We have recruited a paid ‘Conservation Project Coordinator’...a horticulture specialist who will be working for us for one day a week to lead a group of local volunteers to maintain the rich biodiversity of Pensford Field. Activities are already underway, including dead hedging, bulb planting and a range of seasonal tasks. We are keen to maintain the

‘Green Flag’ status of Pensford Field and are currently applying for accreditation. The field is open to the public and can be visited without prior arrangement.”

We are very aware that there have been concerns about the Council’s decision to transfer the lease to Dose of Nature: Alison has also asked us to extend an invitation to a special event: “We would love to invite anyone interested in the future of Pensford Field to a ‘drop in’ coffee morning on Wednesday 11th February, between 10.00am and 1.00pm. The DoN team will be on hand to share more about our charity’s work and to answer any questions about our new role as caretakers of this much-loved and very special community space.”

We will be taking up her invitation, and hope to see you there.

**Shiona Williams and Trevor Whittaker,
Co-Chair and Co-Chair (interim)**

Kew Society Highlights and What's Next

Since our last edition, we have had some fascinating events and visits.

Richmond Railway Station



Kew Society members enjoying a guided visit on 20th November

In September 2025, South Western Railway officially completed a multi-year, £325,000 restoration of the Grade II-listed Richmond station, returning the 1937 Art Deco landmark to its original 1930s glory. The project, a collaborative effort between Network Rail, the Railway Heritage Trust, and Richmond Council, meticulously revived both the interior and exterior of this key transport hub.

The renovation was delivered in two primary phases:

Exterior Revival: Completed in early 2025, this phase included deep-cleaning the Portland stone façade, refurbishing the bronze and mahogany



Tim Hedley-Jones (RHT) Leader Cllr Gareth Roberts Lord Henty and David Wilby at the Opening Ceremony

entrance doors, and reinstating high-level bronze station lettering.

Interior and Canopy Work: Completed by late 2025, this stage saw the installation of handmade bronze fascia panels and new "Glasscrete" rooflights on the entrance canopy. Inside the ticket hall, modern cladding was stripped away to reveal original 1930s timber friezes and green-glass signage.

Enhanced with new Art Deco-inspired chandeliers and a sympathetic LED lighting scheme, the station now serves as an architectural centrepiece for the area. In recognition of its heritage excellence, the project received the Railway Heritage Trust Conservation Award at the 46th National Railway Heritage Awards in late 2025. As of January 2026, the station remains fully functional for millions of passengers annually.

Paul Bethel

Designing Theatres

On 26th November, Nick Thompson came to talk to us at The National Archives about the work that he and his wife, Clare Ferraby, have done together for 50 years designing more than 100 theatre venues. Nick, a past chair of The Kew Society (see interview on Page 10) described his work, illustrated with slides showing the venues that he and his wife have designed or redesigned over the years. He provided a fascinating insight into the painstaking and creative work that goes into theatre design, reflecting the history of the building and the need to modernise the facilities.

Nick trained as an architect whilst Clare had degrees in Painting and Textiles. Their first major theatre project was the design of the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, opening in 1971. Following the success of this project, they designed 100 theatres, mainly in London and the North, covering a very wide range of projects – his approach was subsequently adopted all over the UK and internationally. Cameron Mackintosh commissioned Clare as Design Consultant for all of his theatres – her design work at the Victoria Palace in London is just one recent example of her accomplishments.

Claire Bethel

A world in one room



On Tuesday, 6th January, Jack Andrews spoke to us at The National Archives about Marianne North, the celebrated Victorian botanical artist (1830 to 1890) who travelled the world to capture on canvas the world's exotic plants and landscapes. Jack became one of Kew Gardens' most distinguished volunteer guides following a successful career in commercial radio, TV and cable. In 2012, he stepped back from guiding to produce the acclaimed BBC4 documentary *The Remarkable Miss North*, which formed the basis of his talk, illustrated with just some of her



A delighted audience

remarkable paintings.

The talk was held ten years to the day after the death of Laura Ponsonby, known for her work documenting and writing about the work of Marianne North, particularly through her book *Marianne North at Kew Gardens*. Some of Laura's family were there to hear Jack's final talk.

In *A World in One Room*, Jack Andrews described Miss North's family history before relating her extensive foreign travels and the many adventures that she had in 36 countries all over the world, honing her skills as a biologist and botanical artist. She wrote to Sir Joseph Hooker, then Director of Kew Gardens, in 1879 offering to create and pay for a gallery to showcase her 800 botanical paintings – an offer that was gratefully accepted.

We were honoured that Jack, a much-loved member of the Kew community, chose the occasion to give his final public talk before retiring from speaking.

Claire Bethel

Our 125th Anniversary

Throughout this year, we are planning a series of articles looking back at, and celebrating the history of the Society. What better way to start than by talking to one of our former Chairs. Some of you will remember Nick Thompson from his talk at the National Archives in November about the work that he and his wife have done designing theatres (see opposite). Nick talked to Helen Whitten about his recollections from his time as Chair.

An Interview with Nick Thompson

Nick Thompson, architect, was Chair of The Kew Society some forty years ago. It was a time when developers were hovering around trying to knock down Victorian houses and build flats, but Nick and his team at The Kew Society were having none of that. He and his team stopped a proposal to make Kew Gardens station a concrete slab in the style of Gunnersbury and instead with the Council created the landscape of Kew Village as we now know it. My own road, Layton Place, was the result of his work ensuring that Kew Gardens station did not become a 1960s-style eyesore.

Nick and his wife – the designer Clare Ferraby – moved to Priory Road in around 1967, having looked at homes in many parts of London but seeking somewhere with boundaries. “Kew is an entity,” Nick commented. “It is defined by the river, the parks, the A 316, the railway lines and cemeteries. A place with boundaries is more likely to have a real community” he told me. And this is indeed what they found when they moved here, moving to Lichfield Road some seven years later and taking several years to restore a house built in 1880 that had only ever had one previous owner.



Nick Thompson at home

Nick’s architecture led to him designing The Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, and then with his team he created or revitalised over 100 theatres and concert halls here and abroad while his wife – Clare – worked in her studio in Lichfield Road, creating the interior designs for these and others on her own over her long and successful career.

They both love Kew and would still move here if they were to start their lives again. “It is the green – the trees, Kew Green, Richmond and Old Deer Parks, the cemeteries.” But they both feel there was a greater sense of community among younger people in the 1980s/90s. People mucked in and enjoyed getting together to enjoy events in Kew and to protect its

unique sense of community and the enjoyment of the arts and culture.

“It was easier to get decisions about planning made in those days,” Nick explained. “There was not the bureaucracy of today’s Councils and planning departments, and there was a sense of ambition and optimism that we could get things done.” He and another member of The Kew Society – Bruce Cole QC – put an end to a potential development of multi-storey buildings up against Kew Bridge that would have dwarfed the area around Kew Green. Nick created drawings to demonstrate how the perspectives would be changed by such a development. His Kew Society team were very well prepared, and he was able to demonstrate the support they had by littering an Ordnance Survey map of the area with red pins for Kew Society members and blue pins for those who had contributed to the case against the proposals.

The Inspector was impressed, and in the end the row of smaller houses was built and the landscape preserved. Nick was shocked, a few years ago, when it was suggested, at the end of an AGM, that The Kew Society would have to close because the current chair was resigning. He and another architect – Philip Sayer – immediately said “give us a few days and we’ll find another chair.” They did, and found Mike Glazebrook, who became a “terrific” chair.

Knowledge of architecture, gained through his training, from the age of 16, at the Oxford School of Architecture, certainly made a difference to Nick’s time in his role as TKS Chair as “we knew how to get things done. We knew how things worked.” He told me with delight that he had never had a planning application turned down in his time in practice.

“We had great fun with our parties” Nick laughed as he recounted a party in the hall in Gloucester Road where all the Kew Society team cooked the food and brought decorations from their gardens, but as soon as the doors opened a group of older members rushed to help themselves to all the food so it ran out before the party had started. Nonetheless it was a fun evening, as was a party held at The London Museum of Water and Steam in Brentford which was a “bit of a riot” as they had to shovel coke to make space; and Bill Bundy, who was head of the lighting department at the National Theatre, created a fantastic coloured light display to illuminate the pumps. The event was well attended, there was a jazz band, and guests danced the night away.

Time to arrange for more fun in Kew in 2026 as we celebrate the 125th anniversary perhaps...?

An Interview with Steven McRae

You may have heard of Steven McRae, Principal in the Royal Ballet, who has lived in Kew for twelve years. Steven was brought up in Sydney, Australia, starting lessons in ballet and tap at the age of seven. He gained a scholarship at the age of 17 to the Royal Ballet School. Steven has been with the Royal Ballet since he graduated in 2004, becoming Principal dancer in 2009. Steven also managed to complete a degree in Business Management and Leadership whilst working full-time. He suffered an Achilles tendon injury in 2008, when he was only 22, and was told he would never dance again – but managed to recover in a year with the help of a surgeon. However, in October 2019, he again tore his Achilles tendon during a live performance; the two years it took him to recover was watched by millions in an acclaimed BBC documentary: ‘Dancing back to the light’.

He lives with his wife – Elizabeth Harrod, also a ballet dancer with the Royal Ballet – and their three young children in Kew. Claire asked him about his career, his views on ballet and his future plans.

What made you and your wife decide to settle in Kew?

I grew up in Australia so didn't know much about London. My wife grew up in Yorkshire but went to the Royal Ballet School in White Lodge, Richmond Park, from the age of 11. Every few weeks they would drive to Richmond and she said she always got this special feeling driving through Kew: she thought it was a magical place. We lived in Covent Garden, right next to the Opera House, for nearly ten years; and when we decided it was time to move out of London to start a family, we wanted somewhere convenient for travel. At the time, I was on an aeroplane nearly every weekend so we ruled out anywhere in East London, and Liz just said, we need to look at Kew. It was difficult finding the time to come and view the properties she found, but Liz saw one that had just popped up and said “we have to get this one”.

You came to the UK without your family when you were just 17. Looking back, what would you say to your 17-year-old self as you took what must have been a very difficult decision to leave Australia?

I think I would inject more confidence into the 17-year-old version of myself and tell him there's always a way and that there are really wonderful people around who are willing to help you. I



genuinely was alone age 17, there was no family, I craved being able to go to somebody's home on a Sunday and just have a roast and be normal. The homesickness was a very difficult thing, but what we've learned living in Kew is that there are so many households that are not near family as well and you end up being that support network for each other. Kew has an incredible village atmosphere. I know it's very big, but still it's incredibly small, and there's a lot of beautiful connections. We've made some wonderful friends and you know that that friendship will remain.

Can you tell me what you feel are some of the pros and cons of a career in ballet?

For me, a career in ballet has been extraordinary, because where I grew up, we didn't travel. The world of dance has literally opened up the entire world to me. I've performed in places I just would never have even dreamt of visiting, and I think that's been one of the most beautiful gifts of having a career in dance. Obviously, I got to meet my wife, and we've got beautiful children. But of course,

that's just one, perhaps glamorous, side of the profession. The reality of the profession is that it's incredibly gruelling. It's all-consuming. I'd be lying if I said you're not in pain all the time, because you are in pain all the time. There's always a niggle or something going on with the body.

You have spoken of some of the pressures, and you have undoubtedly chosen a profession with a great many pressures. How do you think these could be addressed?

A lot of it is scheduling issues. So obviously, theatres need performances to go on otherwise, if they don't have bums on seats, there's no income. But the reality is, for a company like us at the Royal Ballet performing at the Royal Opera House, we do so much repertoire, and the reality is the company needs to just be bigger in order to cope with that amount of repertoire. But it's got to come from the dancers as well. We're all told when we're young, it's a short career, make the most of it, but the career's as long as you make it. So if you're smart and look after yourself and learn occasionally to say no, then you could prolong your career. Whereas I think a lot of the training makes us want to do it now. You obviously burn out, you get injured, and then the career is cut short.

What made you decide to do a degree in Business Management and Leadership on top of your very demanding work in the Royal Ballet?

Well, I've always liked studying, I liked school. I went to a normal academic school, not a vocational school. But I also love my profession, and I want to be involved with it as long as I can, so to have some business knowledge and some leadership knowledge and things like that is absolutely crucial and critical, especially now that the Arts Council keeps reducing grants to different organisations. So you need to have some sort of business mind. Then when the day comes that I do step off stage, I can remain part of that profession, from a managerial point of view, or a directing point of view. I also did a Master's degree in marketing.

Many people watched the documentary in which you discussed your two-year recovery from your second tendon injury in 2019. Looking back on that time, what got you through it? Can you tell us what happened and offer any advice to people in a similar position?

When I joined the company, I was very fortunate to get a lot of big opportunities very quickly, the body then quickly said, this is too much. After my



Steven performing at The Royal Ballet
Photograph by Andre Uspenski

initial Achilles tendon injury, I had to have a year off but I didn't have surgery. The big Achilles injury happened on stage during a performance. I'd had three procedures on it before that and then, of course, it snapped. It was my surgeon who said the day after, this is good that it's snapped, it's easier to deal with. I was off almost two years to the day but that was all through lockdown so realistically, I only missed six months because for 18 months of that time, no-one was performing, there was nothing going on. Then, two years after returning from the Achilles and after the documentary, my knee exploded on stage in a performance.

The advances in science are so wonderful now though; even a decade or two ago, if you snapped your Achilles, it was pretty much game over really. But now it's, OK, get back up and get on with it. I think that gives performers a bit more empowerment to know that injuries are inevitable, we're athletes, you're going to get injured. We have a whole full-time medical team at the Royal Opera House of about 15 physios, doctors, psychologists, nutritionists, sports scientists, Pilates instructors, rehab coaches.

But I think it laid bare for me the anxiety and the psychological elements of it, and how challenging it was to make a full recovery and, actually, the

benefits of modern medicine, and having a team which our profession needs more of. Obviously, there's such limited funding and resources for our profession. What we have at the Royal Ballet is not the norm. No other company in the world has that really, so of course I wanted to tell my story, but we wanted to use the documentary to get the conversations happening that this level of care has to become the norm for all performers. It can't just be for certain top companies.

You recently did a session with some disabled young people with Skylarks [a local charity]; what do you think dancing can do for young people with disabilities and/or mental health issues?

Dance is the most beautiful language – everybody can communicate through dance, you don't have to be a dancer. We use our bodies all the time to communicate, even just standing opposite somebody, your body language says so much. And I think there's too many misconceptions of when you say the word dance, people automatically assume you mean ballet, or *Strictly Come Dancing*, or things like that. But of course, they are the people who do it for a living. But dance is the same as football or tennis or rugby: most of the world's population who participate in those sports are not professionals, they do it because it's fun, they enjoy the social aspect. And a lot of people associate dance as something young kids do to a certain age, and then they think that's it, you don't carry on with it. And my messaging is always that dance is for everyone, so whether you are an older person who just doesn't want to go to the gym, or you don't want to go for a run, go to a dance class, it'll make you feel good. It's good exercise, it's social. And the same for anyone who has a disability, it doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to participate.

I selfishly found the sessions we did with Skylarks so fulfilling. I was only there for a few hours, but it was as if I was able to hand them a golden ticket of look here, you are allowed to do this. This is a key for you to perhaps open up a whole new world and to see some of the participants who perhaps were incredibly nervous about it at the beginning or not even sure if they wanted to participate – to see them at the end of the session, fully involved, fully engrossed in it. One young lad at the beginning made it very clear to me that he doesn't like ballet, and by the end, was heard saying, "I love ballet. I want to do more of this." So, yeah, I found those sessions incredibly empowering, not only for the

participants, but also for me. I just think it's an area that I would love to see developed more. It's always my mission when you do a performance that at least one person walks away feeling something's changed, something's clicked.... you've made the hair stand up. So to see that in an environment that was not a performance, was not about seeing this polished, finished product. It was just genuinely what dance can do.

What are your plans for the future?

Well, I'm obviously still performing at the Royal Ballet, and I love being on the stage. I also curate a number of events around the world. I am very fortunate to be one of the artistic directors of a programme in Denmark we do every summer, an outdoor festival. We do it in all different venues all around Denmark, and it's beautiful. It's dance, opera and live music together. It's called *Verdensbaletten*, world ballet. I enjoy doing that because it's an opportunity to bring these performing arts to new audiences. You have many people that perhaps have never seen a ballerina on point, or they've never heard the violin live before, or the power of an opera singer's voice hitting that high note: when you hear those things or see those things for the first time, it can be quite extraordinary, I enjoy curating those programmes. I like to support different charities as much as I can, so it's been lovely to be able to work with Skylarks. And I'm a patron to a number of different charities. There's one called London Children's Ballet which gives opportunities to children, and they put on a West End production of a ballet every year. So children are selected, and they work for six months every Sunday, building up, and they do workshops with people and lessons and create this work, and then they perform it in the West End, and it's all totally for free.

What do you feel are the highlights of living in Kew?

What I remember growing up in Australia was the neighbours that you knew you could always just go and knock on the door, or there were friends that you could go and play with or go for a bike ride with. And around here, there are so many kids that they go to school with and they're running to each other's homes. And I just think that's so valuable to grow up in one of the biggest cities in the world and still have that.

Love Letters at The National Archives

Following on from the success of the MI5: Official Secrets exhibition last year, The National Archives have opened their new exhibition on Love Letters. You may wonder why love letters, by their very nature so personal, are retained in the state's archives – it's fascinating to see the way the curator has identified different types of love in a variety of official documents.

The exhibition features correspondence spanning over 500 years of devotion, longing, sacrifice, heartache and passion. Declarations of love appear in official memorials and wills, poems and drawings. The letters on display cover royalty and parliamentarians, literary icons and unknown scribes, it 'opens the envelope on the stories behind the documents and the consequences of their being, from eternal blessing to execution'.

One letter featured, which was discussed on the BBC's *Today* programme on the day the exhibition opened, is a letter never seen before from the Cambridge Five's spy ring's 'fifth man', John Cairncross to his 27-year old girlfriend, Gloria Barraclough (pretty sure he is the only subject to feature in this exhibition as well as the previous MI5 exhibition).

Also on show are notes sent by Henry VIII's fifth wife, Catherine Howard, to courtier Thomas Culpeper in 1541 which was used to prove they were having a treasonous affair. Other notable exhibits include letters from Charles Kray – Ronnie Kray's father – when facing charges of assault; and a plea for mercy from Oscar Wilde's lover – Lord Alfred Douglas – to Queen Victoria in 1895 begging her to exercise her 'power of pardon' as Oscar Wilde began his sentence of two years' hard labour for gross indecency.

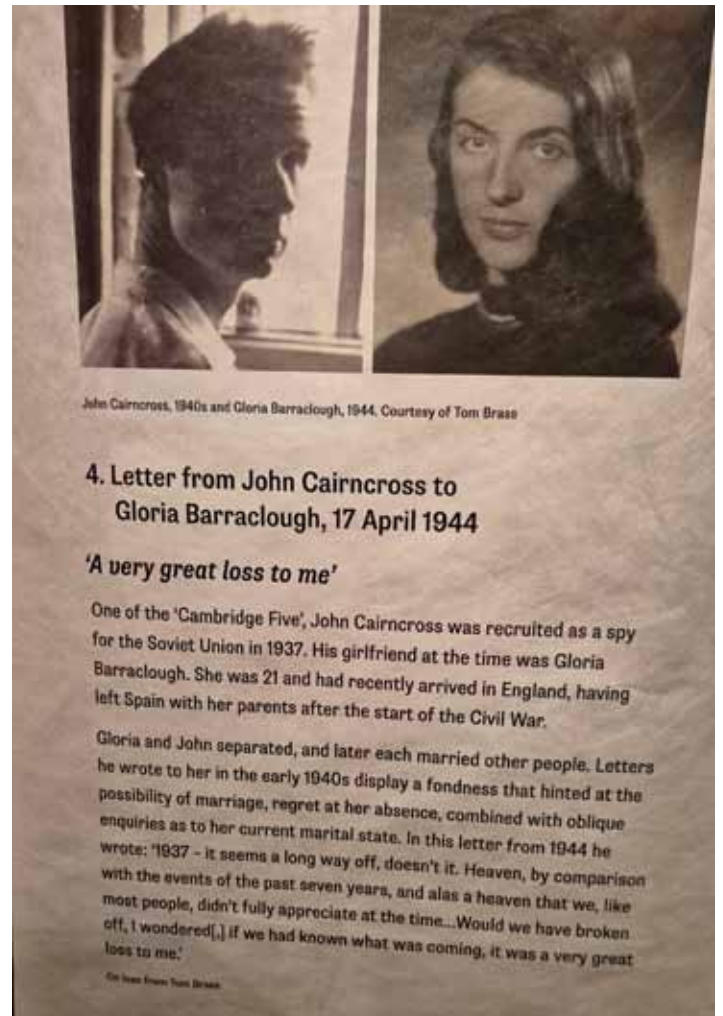
Vicky Iglkowski-Broad, Principal Records Specialist, Diverse Histories at The National Archives Council said: "The National Archives holds a surprising array of expressions of love — some criminalised, unconsummated, or tragically cut short — found

across 500 years of state records. This exhibition takes visitors on a journey of emotional connection and reflection, revealing how love connects all kinds of people and takes many forms, often in the most unexpected places."

It is well worth seeing the exhibition – there are also talks and curators' tours you can book (see website <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/love-letters/#exhibition-events>).

The exhibition will run until 12th April (Tuesdays to Saturdays).

Claire Bethel



Obituary for Diana Ormond

We were all devastated that Diana Ormond, Secretary of The Kew Society, died suddenly on 21st October. A memorial service conducted by the Reverend Hannah Swithinbank in celebration of her life was held on 26th November at St Luke's, which Diana had attended for many years. The church was full, showing how many people's lives she had touched. Her three sons – Patrick, George and Henry – delivered a wonderful eulogy together,

which we have drawn on below.

Diana Hay was born in 1947 in Barskimming, just outside Glasgow. The eldest of five, her father, Mungo, was a GP whilst her mother, Aileen, had been a WREN in the war. The family were Presbyterians. Diana's childhood friend, Pam, describes the house being filled with laughter, fun and music, which could be jazz from Mungo's hifi or Diana or another member of the family playing the

piano. Diana's love of music was to feature throughout her life and was passed on to her children.

At the age of 17, Diana went to St. Andrews University where she lived in a house called Ceilidh (Gaelic for party) where she made lifelong friends before her first big trip abroad, volunteering for VSO as a teacher in Sierra Leone. Aged 23, she moved from there to London where she met her husband, becoming stepmother to Charlotte and Julia and going on to have three sons of her own.

The family settled in Holmbury St. Mary but decided to move to the Isle of Man when her husband's business hit a rough patch. Having bought a house with some land, Diana threw herself into rural life, rearing chickens and then, rather bravely, buying a calf called Bluebell. Diana milked Bluebell every morning, providing the family with their own milk, cream and homemade yoghurt. She looked after orphan lambs which the family nursed by the Aga, feeding them from tonic bottles, and then eating them in the autumn!

After she and her husband divorced in the early 1990's, she decided to retrain as a teacher and move to Kew. She was a good tennis player and joined the Priory Park Club. Her professional life also flourished, and she turned out to be a gifted teacher.

As well as working, Diana enjoyed travelling – she and one of her sons spent a few weeks backpacking in Malaysia, staying in youth hostels, sampling street food, visiting and staying in the longhouse of a former headhunting tribe in the rainforest. She was quite an adventurer and loved to visit family and friends abroad.

By 2009, Diana was a deputy head teacher in Hammersmith. Although she had only a few years to go until her retirement, she wanted one last adventure abroad and was offered teaching jobs in Indonesia, Kuala Lumpur and Moscow. Against her sons' advice, she opted for Moscow, undoubtedly the most challenging of the three, where she taught at the English International School. This turned out to be a great success: she made many friends in Moscow and regaled her family when she returned in the school holidays with stories about her travels to other parts of Russia and visits to the Bolshoi. Diana then returned to Kew and threw herself into



community life, loving the church and the choir at St Luke's. She continued to teach a couple of days a week and took up private tutoring. She loved being a grandmother to her sons' children. What turned out to be her final trip abroad was to Spain for her nephew's wedding, an event which brought the whole family together.

Shiona Williams writes: 'Diana and I first met as trustees of the Kew Community Trust, where we worked together on a number of projects. We quickly established that (maybe because we were both doctor's daughters?), we shared many values and interests and we became firm friends. When Claire – the editor of this newsletter – retired from her position as Honorary Secretary of The Kew Society, nobody put themselves forward to take over the role and, although she was still working and had many other commitments, Diana agreed to take on that task. She was a hugely valued member of the team, not only fulfilling the administrative aspects of running our charity but always contributing balanced and thoughtful comments to our discussions. We all miss her enormously and know that many of our members will be missing her too'.

The eulogy at Diana's memorial shows that she had lived a very full life – her sons commented on her independence, her sense of curiosity, adventure and courage. She formed many rich, close and enduring friendships throughout her life and was always kind and generous. She will be missed by family and friends alike but remembered for a life well lived.

Claire Bethel with contributions from Patrick, Henry and George Ormond, and Shiona Williams

KEW DIARY 2026

| | | |
|--------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| From 24th Jan to 12th April | <i>Love Letters</i> – A Free Exhibition | The National Archives Various |
| 1st February | Kew Village Market | Kew Gardens Rotary |
| 4th February | Jazz evening at Mamma Mia's | kewsupperclub102@gmail.com |
| 6th February | Kew Supper Club | Kew Horticultural Society |
| 6th February | Quiz Night at St. Winefride's | Kew Gardens Rotary |
| 7th February | Coffee Morning at Café Torelli | Café Yukari |
| 8th February | Your Songs, Our Songs (Jazz) | Café Yukari |
| 13th February | Mehr Clef Presents... (Jazz) | Kew Gardens Rotary |
| 18th February | Alice Chalret, MCR Pathways, at Coach & Horses | The Mayor's charities |
| 21st February | Anthony Adkins fund-raising Piano Concert, St. Anne's Church | Café Yukari |
| 22nd February | Mood Indigo (Jazz) | The Kew Society |
| 25th February | Lady Isabel Burton & The Burton Mausoleum, National Archives | Café Yukari |
| 27th February | 7-Star Arts: Piano recital: Ben Shankland | Various |
| 1st March | Kew Village Market | Café Yukari |
| 1st March | Your Songs, Our Songs (Jazz standards) | The Kew Society |
| 5th March | How to discover your family history, National Archives (10.00am) | Café Yukari |
| 6th March | Mehr Clef: Giorgio Serci (guitar) Ursula Melewski & Winnie Greef (Jazz) | St. Anne's Church |
| 6th March | Mario Miralles, piano | Kew The Transition |
| 7th March | Repair & Share at St. Luke's Church | Café Yukari |
| 20th March | Blame it on the... Bossa Nova | Trindle Stores |
| 21st March | Poetry Open Mic, 6.30pm to 8.00pm | Café Yukari |
| 29th March | Mood Indigo (Jazz) | Various |
| 5th April | Kew Village Market | Café Yukari |
| 5th April | Your Songs, Our Songs (Jazz) | Café Yukari |
| 26th April | Mood Indigo (Jazz) | Various |
| 3rd May | Kew Village Market | Various |
| 20th June | Kew Summer Fete | Various |

**Our
congratulations
to our Patron Sir
Donald Insall on
his forthcoming
100th Birthday
on Saturday 7th
February 2026**



STOP PRESS: We are delighted to announce the appointment of Rachel Kent as our new Acting Co-Chair: further details will appear in our next Newsletter.

If Hand-Delivered:

For Address Label

Contact Us

Your Committee includes:

| | | |
|---|--------------------|----------------------------|
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Sir David Durie KCMG
Sir Donald Insall CBE

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