The Chairman's Report.

In closing the AGM last year, very much in line with previous years I commented how I believed 2023 had been a positive one for the Society.

Hopefully, what you hear during this report will provide further assurance that the Society continues to move in the right direction, despite some major challenges which we have had to face in to, and deal with, during this year.

Last year the Chairman's update focussed on how the Society remains true to it's original objectives as listed in our 'Memorandum of Association' which are published each year in the Yearbook. In preparing for this year's update, I again dusted those objectives off and I can say it pleases me that everything we do remains true to those objectives.

One of the objectives I called out last year was 3.1.13 'to co-operate with any other society, organisation or body in the furtherance of our objectives'. It delights me that we have made significant progress on this one, and as tonight's Dinner & Dance evidences we now have all carriage driving bodies in the United Kingdom working collaboratively, which is a first, and I suppose you may wonder why do I think that's important, and I'll tell you, because being aligned as we all face in to challenges wider than just the BDS, challenges such as; Social license to operate, Health & Safety, insurance, road safety etc certainly puts us in a better place, without doubt we are stronger working together.

This year I do not want to tie everything I talk through back to the objectives, but rather want to quickly run through 2024 - the successes and the challenges!

The overseeing of how the Society is run and how it faces in to the challenges is done by Council. The team of Council members have during this year had to face in to significant challenges, with perhaps the most difficult elements involving Council members themselves. We have seen a number of Council members retire this year and I would like to thank those individuals; Penny Hopkins, Kendall Young, Caroline Watson, Julie Elliott, Natasha Manning, and Malcolm Salter for all they achieved whilst members of the Council.

Additionally, and more so, I wish to thank those members of Council who remain; Rob Parry, Antonia Gallop, Roger Hopton, Modris Kesans, Mike King, Nicola Salter, Samantha Searle, Su Woodcock, and Emily Ham. It is this group of individuals who I applaud and I am extremely proud of, for not only how they have handled the challenges of 2024 but also how they have supported me during those challenges. These individuals, with the exception of Emily who's term on Council ends today, I am confident will effectively manage the Society in the coming years.

In addition to the support I receive from Council, I just want to thank our President Colonel Toby Browne, the Crown Equerry, who sadly cannot be with us today due to a clash of dates with the Lord Mayor's parade, along with the Vice Presidents; John Richards, Sallie Walrond, & Caroline Dale-Leech who have all been unfaltering in their support. I cannot stress enough how grateful I am to have their continued guidance and to be able to draw on their limitless wisdom and experience.

In addition to Emily retiring from Council, she is also handing the baton over for Young Drivers. Emily has for over a decade been the 'Commissioner for Young Drivers' a role which she has done extremely well. Sam Searle is taking over the role but really does have a hard act to follow.

I now want to take a few moments to reflect on some of the achievements of 2024:

- Overall the Society continued to run smoothly, we will talk about Finances shortly.
- We again ran approximately 270 events during the year. I must thank the ACs, AACs, and area & branch teams for all their hard work and long hours that go in to organising these events. We should all be really grateful for the work that this band of volunteers perform to enable us all to enjoy our carriage driving.
- In April we had really good news when The Duchess of Edinburgh became our new Patron.
- The Training and Education committee has made significant strides during the year, not only am I delighted with the progress which has been made with refreshing the test structure but during this year we have built our capability around delivering and assessing training & education by onboarding new instructors and assessors. In Scotland, a branch which was struggling with training, we have welcomed a new instructor in Julie Stewart, a new training centre has been approved, and two new assessors in Joyce Simpson & Richard Lanni. In England, I must congratulate Sam Jones our most recent member to qualify as an instructor. The benefits of this is borne out by the increase we have seen in people taking tests and I am delighted with the wide range of members now taking tests we recently had one of our youngest members at 8 years old pass the introductory test whilst we also recently had an eighty year old pass the same test, which really shows the diversity across carriage driving!
- The Publicity & Communications committee have continued to increase the Society's social media presence. A highlight for the committee this year was the show which attracted a great deal of interest and where we also acquired a significant number of new members.
- On the subject of communications I must thank Joan Martin who does such a great job with the editing and production of the Society's magazines, and also to Charlotte Lawson who has for many years done such a professional job with the production of the Year Book.
- Moving on to the national shows the Official Meet of The BDS at the Royal Windsor Horse Show was again well supported and despite the poor weather which impacted the majority of the show the Meet actually took place in almost perfect conditions, a great temperature for the drive with clear sunny skies. The event ran extremely smoothly with all competitors having a pleasant drive and the large number of spectators showing their appreciation to all the competitors. It was extremely pleasing to have 7 turnouts presented from the Royal Mews, including one driven by our Patron the Duchess of Edinburgh.

- The BDS Annual Show at Smiths Lawn was again blessed with super weather, good numbers of entries were forward, and we were extremely blessed to have our new Patron the Duchess of Edinburgh in attendance to present prizes to the champions.
- The BDS Spring Bonanza held on the 12th May at Bury Farm Equestrian Centre, provided members with an early event to attend and once again the weather was kind.
- Unfortunately, our Championship Show due to take place as an integral part of the Chatsworth Country Fair had to be cancelled at the eleventh hour, due to Health & Safety risks which could not be mitigated.
- The Show Committee now under the leadership of Mike King, has some great plans for 2025 which see a change of venue for the Spring Show to near Leicester. Smiths Lawn sees some changes which will hopefully re-establish it as a premier event in the calendar. Whilst the end of year Championship show moves back to Addington Manor Equestrian Centre, where it will run alongside some of the Hackney Horse Society Championships, again incorporate the Society's Trec Championship, and also see qualifiers re-introduced throughout the year to enable members to qualify for this national championship event.
- The Judges Committee under the leadership of Heather Noad have continued to support our panel of Judges. This year saw a Judges seminar introduced alongside the Scottish AGM, enabling our Northern Judges to achieve the criteria of attending the necessary seminars without having to travel 100s of miles to attend the seminar which runs annually alongside this national AGM.
- The Scottish and Welsh branches continue to be really active. On the 26th October I was fortunate enough to attend the Scottish Branch AGM which was well attended. The Welsh Branch AGM is scheduled to take place on XXth October. Many thanks to Penny Hopkins who stood down as Welsh Branch Chair in February, with Rob Parry picking up the role. Also, thanks to Kendall Young and Caroline Watson the Chair and Vice Chair respectively of the Scottish Branch who both completed their term in office at the recent Scottish AGM.
- It would be remiss of me not to mention Sue Mills who retired on the 4th November after running the BDS Office for many years. My heartfelt thanks go out to Sue who cannot be with us this weekend. We did present Sue with gifts for her dedicated service earlier this week. It does however give me great pleasure to introduce you to Betsy Branyan, the Society's new Secretary. Betsy has an extensive CV in the equestrian industry which coupled with her knowledge of carriage driving makes her an excellent person to help run the Society moving forwards. I'm sure you all join me in extending a warm welcome to Betsy.

In addition to managing those successes, Council focus has been consumed by a number of serious issues and challenges. During the Chairman's Report last year, I predicted that our main challenges as we moved in to 2024 would be around road safety, Social License to Operate, and the economy putting further squeezes on spend on past times. Little did I expect the major challenges which we have had to face.

In order to present a balanced view of 2024 performance, I will share a few of those challenges.

- The first of those relates to the economy. At the outset of the year we were notified of yet another significant increase in the cost of the Society's insurance, approximately 15% per year, that increase clearly has an impact on our financial performance.

- The second major challenge arose late 2023 / early 2024, when we were notified that the Society was facing prosecution for multiple breaches to Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, relating to an event which took place in May 2012 where a competitor was fatally injured. The prosecution was particularly concerning as due to the seriousness of the breaches it was possible that imposed sanctions/fines could result in the Society been put out of business – initially it looked like we could be facing a fine between £400 and £500k. Following significant work by Council members and Knights PLC, who represented us, it became apparent that we had no option but to plead guilty. However, we fielded multiple reasons why there should be leniency with the sentencing. The outcome was a £90k fine, which whilst extremely disappointing that we should have to spend Society money to cover the fine, we are fortunate that we have sufficient reserves to cover that amount.

  One thing that is certain following the case, is that as an organisation we need to strengthen our focus, practices and processes in relation to health & safety at all out events. Council has already started to progress what needs to be done, and we have support from external health and safety professionals. Over the next few weeks and months, there will be a number of communications to officers and members stipulating what changes need to be made.

  I would like to thank everyone who supported me during the first half of the year in managing this extremely stressful situation which didn't only include providing reams of evidence from over a decade ago, but also attendance at multiple Swansea Crown Court hearings and many visits to Knights PLC's Birmingham offices .

- The third and final major challenge that I have to callout and perhaps the one that has been the most concerning to Council relates to Conduct.

  What really saddens me is having to mention this, as even though there has been a significant number of issues to deal with during 2024, that number relates to a very small percentage of the membership. We recognise how fortunate we are that the vast majority of our membership do conduct themselves really well. It is simply a case of 'the few, spoiling it for the many'!

  All of us, as members, and perhaps more so as officers, of the Society need to abide by the Code of Conduct, and by the rules set out in the 'Articles of Association'.

Unfortunately, during the year we have seen a significant number of serious breaches to the code of conduct. Most worryingly for me is that a large number of those breaches have involved senior officers in the Society. Those senior officers who should, and perhaps must, lead by example.

Dealing with such breaches, which nearly always relate to unacceptable behaviour is time consuming and painful for Council. Truthfully, I cannot estimate how much Council time has been spent on such matters over the last year but I know it will be without doubt be 100s of hours.

None of us as Council members have any desire to deal with conduct or behavioural issues, that is simply not what motivates individuals to do voluntary roles for the Society.

One of the saddest parts of this is that the 100s of hours which has been spent on such activities , could and should have been spent focussed on positive activities which would move the Society forward not hold us back.

Therefore, I appeal to you all that you familiarise yourself with the code of conduct and the articles of association, that you continue to behave in a considerate and respectful way to others, and that you encourage all others to do so too.

We really want this to be a Society that everyone enjoys, not one where a few individuals are spoiling the fun and enjoyment of others.

In conclusion, I would like to say, 2024 has again been an extremely challenging year on many fronts, but despite that I believe it has been a positive one for the society; one where we have made further progress on transformation, and one where the majority of our members have been able to enjoy our sport.

In closing the Chairman's report, I would just like to thank you for your continued membership of the society

Thankyou

Financial Statement.

I'm going to take a few minutes to just summarise the main points of the accounts for the year ended 31st December 2023.

Page 3 of the accounts shows our turnover increased slightly to £192,491 from £191k the previous year.

The administrative expenditure decreased by £5,712 to £105,837, with the bulk of the decrease relating to Insurance costs.

The exceptional item is the £90k fine imposed by the Court, and whist we paid this in 2024, the law and accounting practices state that because it related to an event that happened in the past is required to be included in the accounts that are still open.

The investment portfolio fared better this year and the overall value increased by £17,852 to £226,984.

All of this results in a loss after tax of £78,469.

Excluding the fine, the result for 2023 would have been a profit of £11,531.

Moving down to page 4, which really positions the current value of the Society, showing 2023 ending on a figure of £213,943, a reduction from the £292k figure we were valued at a year earlier. Obviously the reduction entirely the result of the fine.

Overall I am reasonably comfortable with the financial performance of the Society.

However, we do know having spent time with KBIS that our insurance costs are almost certainly going to see a circa 15% increase for 2025.

You may recall last year how proud I was that we had managed to hold membership subscription costs, with no increase since 2017. Unfortunately, due to the increase in insurance for 2025, along with the loss in value of the organisation, coupled with where we need to increase spend on such things as additional H&S expertise, we have no option other than to increase membership rates for 2025.

Therefore, membership rates for 2025 will be:

Single Membership £65, up from £50

Dual Membership £100, up from £80

Young Drivers £30, up from £20

A new Family membership is being introduced at £120 for 2 adults and 2 children from the same household.

Whilst I am sure that is not the news you wanted, I hope you agree the membership proposition is still class leading.