

Interview with George Baxter, President of Farnham Decorative and Fine Arts Society

During the 1960's, George Baxter had been chairman of the Farnham Society for three years and had become quite well known locally, as well as through being Headmaster of Farnham Grammar School. So in 1982, at a garden party held by the Farnham Society on the lawns at Farnham Castle, he was a natural choice of three ladies, members of Fleet NADFAS, to approach and ask "Please can you help us to start a NADFAS society in Farnham?" He was happy to agree as it was "something after my own heart".

Following a meeting at his house, it was decided to hold the next meeting in the Anderson Room (now the Long Kiln Room) at The Maltings on 18th January, 1983 to which they invited Mrs. P. Hallett from NADFAS House (the New Societies representative) and 25 local people. George said Mrs. Hallett wore "lots of jewels and bracelets" and tried too hard for his liking to put a headquarters stamp on things but he wanted it to be more independent and to arrange things the way he liked: "Having run a school, I was used to getting my way!"

A steering group of twelve was appointed. Most of them were of a similar age, i.e. in their late 60's or 70's, and Hilda Jones was also a retired Principal (and previously Director of Studies) from Denman College, the WI adult education centre. Her background was extremely helpful as she knew many lecturers (and indeed Patricia Fay had come to her for help when setting up her first DFAS group). Joan George was a member of the WI Surrey Federation Executive Committee and had done a great deal of public speaking within the WI and gained a lot of committee experience through that so "she was extremely competent". Molly Saunders had been head of a teacher training college in Putney and recently retired to the Bourne. George remembers that she was a very good first Secretary. Pat Lydall was one of the youngest members of the steering group (and, of course, is still a member to-day along with Hilda Jones who later became Chairman from 1987-90).

Another original participant was, of course, Reg Thompson. George knew Reg who had been projectionist at Farnham Castle for many years. When Reg accepted George's invitation to be the Society's projectionist, he may not have anticipated that he would continue to provide this most fundamental service until January, 2001!

The hardest decision to make was the timing of the lecture meetings but they decided on the third Tuesday morning of the month having done their research on when other local societies held their meetings. "It was a great asset to have The Maltings as a venue" said George. "It had only recently opened as a public venue and they could also offer catering facilities which was useful." They then decided to hold a lecture to publicise the new society. They each wrote to about 20 of their friends as well as publicising it locally in the press, etc. Hilda Jones recommended Edward Saunders as an ideal lecturer for this occasion and he suggested that he lecture on "The English Country House". It was held in April, 1983, in the Great Hall at The Maltings and over three hundred attended, each paying £1 entrance fee, which covered their costs. It was a huge success and 250 signed up and 50 were put on the waiting list but this was then quickly altered to 300 members plus 36 on the waiting list. (The die was cast!)

The inaugural lecture was given by Wellesley Clinton on "The Decorative Arts" on 19th September, 1983. George Baxter was appointed Chairman; Mrs Joan George, Vice Chairman; Hon. Sec. Miss Molly Saunders; Hon Treas. John Chown; Mrs. Joyce James, Membership Secretary; Miss Hilda Jones, Programme; Mrs. Elizabeth Robertson did the flowers; Mrs Pat Lydall was the Social Secretary, and Miss Phyllis James and Mrs. Con Pinchbeck made up the Committee.

In those days, society members were invited to take part in the vetting of prospective lecturers and George remembers going to one of these sessions at the RIBA in Portland Place with Hilda Jones, who was “very enthusiastic and had a lot of common sense”. His Vice Chairman, Joan George, was a good friend of his and as she lived in Trafalgar Court, it was always very convenient for George to put notes through her door on his way to The Maltings. In his second year as Chairman, George had to give up the chair when he became very ill and Joan took over very ably.

Joyce James, the first Membership Secretary, he remembers as a very good public speaker and she later became Chairman in 1990-92. She was followed by Louise Collier who decided on the tenth anniversary of the Society to invite George to become President, which he was very pleased to do. He has continued to give help and guidance to successive Chairmen: Susan Filer who went on to become National head of Church Recorders; Hazel Lamb and Kate Siebert, now our Area Chairman. I first got to know George when I was organizing the first Schools Art Exhibition and remember vividly the warmth of his encouragement when I sought his advice.

We still have 56 members of the current Society who were among the founder members which surely only goes to show that George is quite right when, to the question, “Would you like to see any changes in Farnham DFAS over the next 20 years?”, he replied: “Don’t change – continue with the Society as it is. There was a great need for the society when it began and judging by the numbers still wanting to join, you’re doing a good job. Go on with the good work!”

Thank you, George. We will do our best.

Elizabeth Bagnall
11.3.03.

