

Needlemakers Webinars: Staying Connected during the Pandemic

It is already a year since the first in the series of webinars that have punctuated the pandemic. On April 20th 2020 liveryman Dr Ellie Cannon, known for her media work with Sky and the Mail on Sunday, provided us with insights from the frontline as we were adapting to the world of social distancing, lockdown, zoom calls and Thursday night NHS clapping.

Since then we have held 14 further webinars, and there are four more planned before the summer break. In the spirit of adventurers, we have travelled to places near and far: The Globe Theatre, House of Lords, Forge Needlemaking Museum, Royal School of Needlework and the Clocktower at St Pancras among them.

And we have been informed, stimulated and entertained by speakers from the livery, charitable organisations that we support, education, innovation – and from the arts.

As we look back over the last year, a number of members have asked how we got started, what were the challenges of setting up a new way for the livery to come together in the virtual world, and what have been my personal highlights.

Meeting of minds

The Mansion House Banquet on the last day of February 2020 was, as ever, a magnificent occasion. The trumpeters and orchestra were on top form, our Court of Appeal speaker opened our eyes to the challenges faced by those on the Bench...and yet the winds of change were gathering. The Loving Cup was out of action, and greetings were confined to the nodding of heads or knocking of elbows.

The UK entered its first lockdown a few weeks later. The upcoming livery activities, be they Court and committee meetings, lunches or dinners, had to be re-evaluated and in many cases cancelled.

Towards the end of March I was on the phone with livery Almoner, Jill Cox. Jill's dedication to her role, and the empathy with which she communicates with those to whom she reaches out is well known. She mentioned that she was in touch with a number of the livery who were in the shielding category, and contemplating with some trepidation the impact the pandemic restrictions were going to have on their daily lives. A recurrent theme was a sense of loss of interaction, including through meeting with livery friends both informally and at livery events.

As we chatted, the question took shape in both our minds as to what we could do? In one of those moments of serendipity that many of us experience at times of need, we had a flash of inspiration and uttered in unison. "Webinars!".

We had both been fortunate in joining online events in recent weeks including, in my case, an interesting event organised by my University alumni association featuring Professor David Spiegelhalter, the leading statistician who has appeared in the media on many occasions, and we agreed that they could be a marvellous way of connecting people and giving them something to look forward to.

In quick order we were able to get hold of the Master and PM Martyn Chase, Chair of the Fellowship Committee. Both were immediately enthusiastic about the idea, and Martyn had the perfect proposal as to who to invite as our inaugural speaker. The question arose as to who would have the

time to organise and host a webinar series. As I had recently started a career sabbatical and, together with Jill, had set the ball rolling, it was a natural opportunity to offer my services.

Finding a format that works

From the initial conversations with the Master, Martyn, Jill and Fiona the roadmap for the webinars emerged. Familiar as we now are with lockdowns, the first one was a strange experience. The details of the increasing incidence and death rates from the virus were a constant feature of the media and – understandably – a cause of concern. It was clear that holding regular webinars would be a welcome distraction, allowing members to focus on other things and to have the reassuring experience of being in one another's (virtual) presence.

What format should the webinars take? Receiving information via a presenter on a screen can be engaging, but doesn't have to be a one-way street. So we settled on having time for questions and answers at the end of each presentation. Whilst these were initially submitted in advance, we soon got to grips with sending questions via the "Chat" during the webinar and having members pose questions in person. Our speakers have embraced the opportunities to illustrate their subjects with presentations, photos and videos. And we have enjoyed live performances from several, notably liveryman Michal Rogalski and violinist Simon Blendis (and his family).

Reithian Aims

The themes that our speakers have addressed have chimed with the public service aims identified by John Reith, first Director-General of the BBC: "To educate, inform, and entertain".

Finding guests to entertain us has been one of the easier aims for me to try to fulfil. Although my career to date has seen me working as a solicitor in the film industry, at heart I am a musician. I started singing at a young age and was for a time the west Somerset answer to Aled Jones, regularly singing solos for local choral societies, in my church choir or at the occasional cathedral or abbey. Once the treble voice had run its course, my energies turned to the viola, and I have continued to play in non-professional symphony orchestras ever since. Before turning to law, I studied for degrees in Music at the University of Cambridge and at King's College London. I have also had the pleasure of sitting on advisory boards at Spitalfields Music and English National Opera. Ivan, my husband, happens to work in the music world, having been Director of Opera at the Berlin State Opera and currently running IVC, the internationally renowned singing competition based in s'Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands.

This has given me ample opportunity to get to know professionals in the performing arts. It has been a pleasure to invite several of them to tell us about their careers. Welcoming the opera singer Dame Sarah Connolly was a personal highlight. Sarah is a singer whose career I have followed from the early 1990s, and who I had the pleasure of getting to know through Ivan who has cast her on a number of occasions to star in productions at the Liceu Opera in Barcelona. She is a passionate ambassador for her craft, and has charted an astonishing vocal journey from Bach and Handel to Mahler and Wagner. Someone I had met only in passing - Neil Constable, Chief Executive of the Globe - gave us a fascinating insight into the educational activities of the historic theatre company and testified to the remarkable speed with which many arts organisations responded to the pandemic, using it as an opportunity to reach wider virtual audiences and adapt the way in which they performed. And, most recently, conductor Charles Hazlewood, who is fast emerging as a TV

personality and with whom I attended a conducting course way back when, spoke with passion about his founding of Paraorchestra and the new route his career is taking.

Whilst these were “easy wins”, it is the non-musicians who have satisfied my innate sense of curiosity and desire to be stimulated by learning new things. The Master’s son, Alex Whitton, addressed social mobility and educational equality as he shared with us his work with Universify Education. And the livery’s Honorary Chaplain, Bishop Christopher, gave us an insider’s perspective on what it means to be a Lord Spiritual, as well as an absorbing historical overview of the upper chamber. Hearing from the leaders of two of the charitable organisations with which the livery is closely associated – The Forge Needlemaking Museum and the the Royal School of Needlework – has been particularly satisfying and has given me a deeper understanding and appreciation of how resourceful they are.

A Team Effort

It is often commented that the Needlemakers are a friendly bunch. And I can certainly testify to this. It has been reassuring and heartening to receive messages of thanks from members, and to hear how the webinars have struck the right note. For some they have awakened memories. For others they have opened horizons to areas with which they wish to engage more deeply. For all, the webinars have provided a welcome diversion and opportunity to come together. And for those members who also have difficulty attending events in person during non-Covid times, they have been a welcome way in which to re-engage with the livery.

Putting together the webinars has been a team endeavour. They would not have happened without the support of the Master, Jill (co-initiator and tireless in encouraging members to participate), Martyn (champion of the webinar series and host of the webinar with former Lord Mayor Sir Charles Bowman and of an upcoming one in the summer) and, critically, our multi-talented clerk Fiona Sedgwick. Fiona has worked her magic in corralling livery members into the Zoom room, ensuring everything works like clockwork during the event, and recording the sessions so that they can be shared with members afterwards.

A number of you have kindly remarked that you look forward to hearing my voice, and have enjoyed the conversations that I have had with our speakers. I have even been asked if I have considered becoming a television presenter. Whilst flattering, I fear that ship has sailed! Although I faced the initial webinars with some trepidation, I have found hosting them a hugely enjoyable experience. Unexpectedly perhaps, it has enabled me to combine the experience gained through my musical and legal pursuits: listening carefully, the importance of communicating clearly, forensic questioning and a readiness to let go and allow time to unfold in its own way.

Holding events by means of webinars has been a necessary response to the situation we have found ourselves in. I am proud that we were able to get them up and running so quickly and to offer such a varied and uplifting programme. We’ve learnt fast and the series has provided sustenance for our hearts and minds. I very much look forward to getting together in person again before long, and hope that – although devised as a stop-gap – webinars will have a role to play in our livery calendar going forwards.

Nick Macrae