Chair's Report 2025

2024 – 25 has been an exceptional year for the Society.

We have continued to build on our Suffolk foundations in the west of the county at Ickworth and at The Guildhall, Bury St Edmunds and after a number of years' absence, we made a return to the London stage for Made London 2024 and London Craft Week 2025.

We have re-engaged with our Patron – Trevor Pickett and we have introduced a Small Grants and Awards Scheme. We have reviewed and overhauled certain aspects of our income stream and we welcomed nine new members. Our social media viewing figures exceeded all expectations, and our website has been brought up to date.

We have much to celebrate. Our successes can be partly attributed to those members who worked on specific projects but ultimately it is the high quality of craftsmanship within the society that has proved that it is not outclassed on a wider platform and can hold its own wherever it exhibits.

Our 2024 –25 exhibition programme was back-to-back as we took up opportunities to show when they arose which entailed reduced notice in a couple of instances.

Our first exhibition was In May 24 when we showed at the Minories in Colchester. This was in a continuing attempt to spread our presence across and around Suffolk and adjoining counties. The venue was the ground floor Girling Room and despite the Minories' proximity to First Site, we struggled to attract a high footfall. Fortunately we had negotiated a reduced venue hire rate to compensate for the short notice in taking the space and the limited days of public opening but we made a small loss overall.

In August 24 we returned to Ickworth Estate for the Society's second Summer Exhibition in the West Wing. The theme was Ickworth House and the Estate.

Unfortunately, the lift repairs were not signed off until the week after the start of the show. This made installation hot and heavy work with more than half of the membership deciding to exhibit but the effort was worth it, and we mounted our most successful show in the 24-25 programme. There were demonstrations by some exhibiting members but no workshops this time. We had learnt from the previous year's administrative experience that these were time consuming as everything was run through the Trust's website. This time we were open daily and takings reflected this and we made a profit. The exhibition overlapped with Open Heritage Week and so access for non-National Trust members was made available. Our relationship with the events team at Ickworth continues to grow and strengthen and it is a partnership to cherish.

23 makers showed at Made London in October 24. It was a challenging experience to transport all the exhibits to the venue of One Marylebone and to install a show in a meaningful way in less than 24 hours. We managed however and it was gratifying to give members' work a London platform and to make the sales we did. We received a

generous donation of £800 from the Friends to help defray costs but despite this and a large sale at the Private View, we made a loss.

The whole event was a useful exercise in logistics and proved it is possible to mount an event out of our home territory. The national exposure for the Society must be welcomed and I hope that those exhibiting members have added value to their CVs by showing at such a well respected Fair.

The Guildhall exhibition started later than in previous years due to a pre-existing booking in the Guildhall diary. Visiting numbers were good however and sales higher than the previous year. This show is becoming a fixture in Bury St Edmunds' Winter calendar although a clash with the Cathedral's Christmas Fayre should possibly be avoided in future planning. High fuel prices mean a threatened increase in hire charges in November 2025 for the Guildhall.

Within the 24-25 financial year, the shows produced a turnover of slightly under £36,000 for the Society with £24,132 being paid to makers. Costs of hire, travel expenses and other outgoings meant that we made a manageable loss of some £1,500.

Success should not be defined by finance alone.

Losses should be balanced with the higher profile the Society is achieving and its status on a national stage. We continue to attract a healthy number of new membership applications and we are being readily accepted to participate in prestigious London events because of the quality of members' craftsmanship.

The exhibitions could not take place without the leading show organisers and their teams. Thanks go to Liz Chester, Sarah Woodcock and Alison Dane for their hard and dedicated work in mounting the shows and to those they gather around them to install, curate and dismantle.

Other key personnel are those involved in conducting all aspects of publicity for the Society. Terry Bryan for graphic design, Helen Allen for the website, Chloe Scott as publicity officer and Clare Gaylard for social media. They have all worked exceptionally hard and we have hit new highs in our visibility. The introduction of the concept of

collaboration on Instagram posting saw our viewing figures rise to over 42,000 in May this year. This is a phenomenal achievement, and huge thanks must go to Clare Gaylard for such professional and dedicated work.

At the last AGM the Society agreed to raise member subscription levels to the pre-covid figure of £100 per year. It also approved the introduction of an exhibition fee of £15 per exhibitor per show. I hope that these adjustments will go some way to move the Society towards profitability. The shows are closer to breaking even but the running costs of the Society are such that we have incurred a loss again this year. It was the introduction of

a new IT platform for the Treasurer, Secretary and Chair to use and higher insurance cover that has increased the core expenses. The IT costs will reduce in the current financial year 2025-26 and we will review all our expenses to see if other economies can be made.

Our reserves however have allowed us to introduce a Small Grants and Awards Scheme for the next three years. Applications are invited twice a year and sums of up to £500 per successful applicant are available, subject to membership of at least one year and meeting other criteria. Moira Goodall is the first successful claimant, and her award will go towards the purchase of new studio equipment.

We continue to receive a healthy flow of applications to join the Society with entry points twice a year. Applications are assessed by the Committee plus an expert in the appropriate discipline for the applicant. Interviews are conducted on zoom. The new process of reviewing and marking applications ensures each candidate receives identical treatment and a written record exists for the process. Since April 2024 we have welcomed the following new members:

Sarah Cannell, Marie Coomber, Marta Dyer Smith, Don Hawkley, Val Jarvis, Mark Papworth, Claire Pirie, Nicholas Rowe and Janene Waudby.

No business could be conducted on behalf of the Society without its Committee.

This year Alison Dane and Ruth Holt will stand down as members after many terms of commitment. Alison will remain as Exhibition organiser for the Guildhall but with Ruth's departure we will be without an editor for the newsletter – M.A.K.E.R. and a new member coordinator. Sarah Woodcock is retiring as Secretary but will remain on the committee for the rest of her term and will continue to supervise the Ickworth show. Claire Pirie has kindly offered to take over the Secretary role as from the AGM. I am hugely indebted to all members of the Committee for the work they put into the

meetings and the Society's activities and their personal support of me is much appreciated.

The Society faces several challenges: – a downturn in economic confidence, an influx of cheap factory-made "craft" products and considerable competition for expenditure on the applied arts. This is the Society's 55th year since its foundation in 1970.

To weather the storms of 2025 and survive for a further 55 years I believe we need to forge relationships with new significant partners with cultural capital, build on those relationships we already have and be bold in where we choose to show.

This will be my last year in the position of Chair of the Society. I have decided to stand down by the end of May 2026 at which point I will have worked with you for 4 years. It has been an extremely rewarding experience and I have enjoyed getting to know as many members as possible. I have loved being involved in the exhibitions and

persuading the Society to have a presence in London. I have mixed emotions about leaving of course and would like to thank everyone I have come across for their support and friendship. It's been a special time for me. Thank you for everything and I wish this great Society the very best in the future.

Juliet Bowmaker

August 2025