



History of the Chiltern Decorative and Fine Arts Society

No.1 Society of NADFAS

Originally called '**The Chiltern Antiques Group**', it first met in 1965 in the Long Room at Chenies Manor on the 28th January, where a plaque still marks the occasion. The speaker was Miss D.K. Millington on the subject: '**Small Antiques in our Homes**' describing her collection of Victorian tea spoons. The formation of such a society grew from an idea of Patricia Fay who together with five other women, Elizabeth Watts, Cherry Aston, Edna Johnson, Georgette Johnson and Audrey Chavasse set the group in motion, each sending out 20 invitations. Subsequent meetings were held at the Crown in Old Amersham until November 1965 when the society moved to the present venue at the Community Centre in Chalfont St. Peter.

Patricia Fay, Founder. Patricia Fay was member No.1 and member No.2 was Audrey Chavasse, whose husband Christopher wrote the first constitution and later became one of our Vice-Presidents. Patricia Fay lived with her husband Charles, a barrister, and two daughters, Caroline and Rachel in a house in Village Way, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire. She was confined to bed for some months with a spinal injury and during this time worked to make her dream a reality.

Lady Deramore, the first Vice-Chairman, commented,

"When I first met her almost forty years ago she was recovering from an operation on her spine, lying in a swing hammock encased in plaster and looking quite radiant. With time on her hands, she could find no general source of information about silver, porcelain etc., hence the idea of the Chiltern Antiques Group. From the beginning, she was determined that it would not be a group of dilettante housewives filling in their time but a serious organisation with first-class lecturers and study groups so that in due course the members would be able to serve the community; hence Church Recorders, book restoration etc."

By 1966, there were 123 paid-up members (Membership Fee £2 shillings). In 1968, there were 200 members. The objects of the group were to '**enhance the appreciation of our heritage, both in museums, galleries and private houses and eventually to teach us how to look after our own antiques and objets d'art.**' It provided the opportunity to study the Decorative Arts not hitherto available outside London.

The society had attracted some attention from the press and elsewhere, as will be seen from the comments below!

"One must be careful this interest (fine and applied arts) is taken seriously and this and other societies do not degenerate into merely popular social gatherings and outings."
Clive Rouse Feb 1967

"I have absolutely nothing against women meeting to swap sponge cake recipes or listen to home-spun talks on loose cover-making – if that's what they enjoy. But the

thought that so many are evidently interested in a serious study of the decorative and fine arts and now have an opportunity to develop that interest really pleases me.”

Veronica Papworth, Sunday Express, March 31st 1968

Interestingly, at that time, the members were mostly young women with children at school and the timing of the meetings, 10.30am –12noon was set to fit in with dropping off and collecting from nursery school.

“What’s in a name?”

The name was changed to the Chiltern Decorative and Fine Arts Society in 1968. Following a visit to Windsor Castle when the policeman at the gate said, **“Are you the antique ladies?”**, Patricia thought it was time to change the name! Indeed, Sir Hugh Casson reinforced that sentiment as reported in the Times in 1966:

“Change your name”, says Sir Hugh.

“Sir Hugh Casson, world-famous architect, and one of the liveliest controversialists in the art-world today, somewhat shattered his audience at Dr Challoner’s Grammar School Amersham last Thursday, by suggesting that the Chiltern Antiques Group – who organised his talk – should change its name. He took as his subject the preservation of the arts – and architecture in particular – but went on to stress the danger of lack of realism in not accepting that however beautiful an ancient building maybe, there comes a time when it is no longer worth keeping.

*It was in this connection that he criticised the nomenclature **“Chiltern Antiques Group”** for he thought it implied a blind approval of all that was old – simply because it was old. Perhaps in deference to his audience, however, Sir Hugh did suggest an alternative.*

*Sir Hugh’s talk, entitled **“The Future of the Past”** was the first public meeting to be organised by the Chiltern Antiques Group since it was formed last year. The group achieved success almost overnight and now there is a waiting list for the various courses and study groups that are run.” **The Times 3rd November 1966.***

The Cornucopia Logo

In 1969, a competition was launched for a suitable emblem for the society and the cornucopia design was selected.

Presidents and Vice-Presidents, Past and Present

The first President was Mrs. James de Rothschild (1965-1975) and the Vice-Presidents were Oliver Millar CVO FSA, (later Sir Oliver) Keeper of the Queen’s Pictures, Clive Rouse MBE FSA, Historian and Elliot Viney DSO MBE FSA. **Subsequently, the Presidents were:** Sir Oliver Millar (1975), Elliot Viney (1986) and Mrs Pamela Cohn (2002) – ex-Chairman of NADFAS.

Vice-Presidents: Oliver Millar 1966, Dr Clive Rouse 1966-68, Elliot Viney 1967, The Lady Deramore 1970-85, Nancy Armstrong 1971-84, Richard Came 1984, Christopher Chavasse 1986, Helena Hayward 1986-89, Elizabeth Gordon 1990, Lady Popplewell 1991-98, The Earl Howe 1998, Pamela Cohn 2000-2002, Catherine Dolman 2002, Anthea Fyler 2002.

Study Groups

Study Groups were set up to arrange a series of lectures to study a subject in greater depth than was possible at the monthly meetings and to follow these up with museum visits and outings. Furniture, Silver and Porcelain study groups were set up in 1965 and in the following years followed groups for the study of History of Art and Ancient Civilisations.

Church Recorders started in 1972

With the help and scholarship of one of our original Vice-Presidents, Clive Rouse, Church Recorders was begun with the Parish Church at Chalfont St. Giles.

Heritage Volunteers started in 1975 as the Voluntary Conservation Corps

The Group was asked to clean books at Milton’s Cottage at Chalfont St. Giles and after appropriate tuition from the V & A, tackled the task with skill and alacrity. Woburn Abbey was a second venue

where after a visit by the group, the Duke of Bedford and his wife Nicolette requested the help of the volunteers to catalogue and restore book bindings there.

At West Wycombe, the group was given a tour of the house by Sir Francis Dashwood and subsequently, a CDFAS black-tie event was held there. Following on from this, CDFAS provided volunteers to act as guides through the National Trust for the house.

A quote from Historic House Autumn 1984:

“The NADFAS volunteer is changing its image – the industrious band of people who labour under the cruel nickname ‘the Association of Dragons and Fiery Spinsters’ and called ‘The Antiques’ by their husbands.”

In October 1967, the following paragraph appeared in Bucks Life:

“Backed by Patricia Fay’s drive and charm and the proven success of the Chiltern Antiques Group, there is no reason why the decorative and fine arts societies should not be the most valuable labour force that the owners and custodians of Britain’s works of art have ever been offered.” And in Country Life in 1974, the volunteers were described as “Handmaidens of the Arts”!

From a mustard seed...other societies founded

By 1967, two more Societies had been founded: The Thame Fine Art Study Group and Harrogate Decorative and Fine Art Society. The latter was founded by a Chiltern member who moved to Harrogate. The Vale of Aylesbury and the Gerrards Cross societies were next to be inaugurated.

At the AGM, Patricia Fay proposed that it was time to consider forming an association of societies amongst other reasons to *“develop our status and influence in the art world”*.

In June 1968, with the encouragement of Helen Lowenthal from the V&A, a meeting was held in London to form the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS). The President was Sir Trenchard Cox and Vice-Presidents Helen Lowenthal, Oliver Millar and John Pope-Hennessy. The inaugural meeting was held at the V&A when the Earl of Pembroke presented an illustrated lecture on his house, Wilton. Indeed, from small beginnings in 1965 has grown a vibrant national and international organisation, seeded by the passion and drive of Patricia Fay.

Anniversaries and celebrations

Over the years, CDFAS has celebrated its various anniversaries and in 2015, it celebrates its 50th anniversary when a number of special events are planned. Of note was the 40th anniversary when a special commemorative lecture *“Forty Years as an Art Critic”* was given by Brian Sewell at Eton College. Celebrations continued with a tour and lunch at the House of Lords at the invitation of The Lord Howe. A donation was made to St. George’s Chapel, Windsor for the restoration of two books to commemorate the anniversary and that year, our Anniversary Newsletter was awarded the NADFAS media prize.



Patricia Fay died on the 23rd October 1979 and the first lecture of each year at CDFAS, coinciding with Patricia’s birth-date, is nominated the Patricia Fay Memorial Lecture. Some words from Patricia to Elliot Viney about NADFAS *“I do hope NADFAS never becomes too solemn or over-organised. After all it ought to be fun”*, provide a very apt and inspiring memory of our founder.

An MBE for a Heritage Volunteer

In 2012, Barbara Cullimore was awarded the MBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List for her outstanding service as a Heritage Volunteer over many years. Our society is justly proud of her achievement and recognition.