

Friends of Kenwood AGM 2026 – Chair's Report

2025 was one of the most eventful years for the Friends of Kenwood. Two world class exhibitions were staged in the House with the crucial support of the Friends.

Heiress: Sargent's American Portraits brought together 8 oil paintings and 12 charcoal portraits of American woman who made such an impact on British Society. The centenary celebration of John Singer Sargent attracted some 35,000 visitors and received worldwide publicity. The exhibition had been underwritten by the Friends of Kenwood who believed its impact would far outweigh the risk. We were pleased that our confidence was rewarded and our investment resulted in a significant addition to our curatorial fund from ticket sales.

To enable the exhibition to go ahead the Friends agreed to lead a fundraising campaign and became the lead partner for English Heritage. This was the first time the FOK had attempted a major fundraising initiative, and its success will be a blueprint for further projects. Major gifts were received from institutions and foundations through the work and contacts of Richard Ormond, Sally Doganis and Helen Payne.

Heiress was the brainchild of FOK Council member Richard Ormond and EH senior curator Wendy Monkhouse.

FOK drew up a Heads of Agreement with English Heritage and both EH and FOK worked tirelessly to make it the success it became. In particular, Helen Payne, Mark King, Ken Solomons and Mala Gole worked with their colleagues at English Heritage to support them, with marketing support from Tracy Abraham.

After Heiress a small and extraordinary exhibition, Double Vision: Vermeer at Kenwood, was staged, bringing together Vermeer's Guitar Player that hangs in the Dining Room at Kenwood, with the Philadelphia Art Museum's version. The two paintings on the same subject were displayed side by side for the first time since they were created 350 years ago. The exhibition was free and was part funded by a donation from the Friends. Again, it attracted many new visitors to Kenwood House and received favourable press coverage.

Both Exhibitions were accompanied by lectures as part of our monthly series of lectures, organised by Angela Cox, Richard Ormond and Patricia Hardy, which have consistently been sold out across the year. Nicholas Fielding has been responsible for setting up the audio-visual equipment as well as the live transmission of the lectures to our wider audience. The events team organised several sold-out events throughout the year, giving our members the opportunity for curator led tours of the exhibition. The book launch of Guinness: A Family Succession by the current Lord Iveagh was a great success as was the launch of Adrian Tinniswood's book: The Houses of Guinness.

In September 2025 the Friends launched a campaign to fund the dedicated Curator post at Kenwood. English Heritage agreed that if FOK could rise the funds the post would be able to continue. This will be our focus for the next year as well as planning events for future years to celebrate the centenary of the Iveagh Bequest.

Our Treasurer, Ken Solomons has had the added task over overseeing the costs of staging both exhibitions, ensuring donations were received and accounted for, as well as his usual responsibilities in overseeing the FOK Accounts. It has been a monumental task and one he has done effectively and efficiently.

Finally, all the members of FOK Council have assisted in fundraising and development which is why 2025 has been such a resounding success.

Dame Jenny Abramsky