

CSCS NEWS

The newsletter of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality

34

Spring 2008

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EDITORIAL

CSCS struggles on – for the moment – and still has work to do. That was the conclusion of our AGM this February.

Most of this edition is taken up with the various minutes and reports of that AGM. As usual, it was a rather select group which gathered at St Anne's Church, Soho, to carry out our annual business and to hear Christina Rees urge us to carry on. There were ideas in plenty, but who will help us put them into effect?

Christina in her keynote address gave us much food for thought. She endorsed the view that there is simply no other organisation which is doing what CSCS is attempting to do, and that there is a continued need to ensure that the fundamental issues of Christianity and sexuality are debated and the Churches' thought thereby developed. In particular she urged us not to give up on our contacts with theological educators. Members will recall that our recent attempt to interest theological colleges and networks in our activities, through a mailing of this Newsletter, appeared to fall on stony ground. But Christina gave instances of initiatives within the colleges, possibly influenced by that attempt, in which ordinands and the newly ordained had taken up issues of sexuality as a personal vocation. Members at the AGM felt that we should be initiating direct dialogue with leading theological educators and perhaps developing materials which could be used in initial or continuing ministerial education. This would be in addition to - or perhaps even prior to - our Chair's proposals to build a network of organisations concerned with faith, sexuality and justice.

Shortly before the AGM, we had messages from some of our leading supporters who were unable to be present. Taken alongside Christina's encouragement, they make interesting reading. All of them took the same line – the work is vital. One instanced a discussion which took place in a local Changing Attitude meeting regarding the nature of sexual commitment, which a diverse group felt unable to tackle and found a source of embarrassment. The Churches need people and materials to facilitate such discussions, which can raise extremely sensitive issues. The traditional Christian position on lifelong monogamy, on which many of us were reared, is very different from the mores of many contemporary subcultures – yet both that position and those mores are evolving, and this can be painful and confusing. The issue of what sexual commitment means in contemporary society, and how in practice faith can inform that commitment, is one relevant to gay and straight alike. And the debates about women's ministry have made all too clear that confusion still reigns in the Churches about how women and men should respond to one another within both an authentic sexual context and an authentic spirituality. In these areas, all of us need help, and all of us need to help each other.

And, of course, to an extent we do. Christina herself, though best known as a campaigner on the specific issues of women's ministry, has written helpfully and honestly in her little book *The Divine Embrace* about the deeper issues of sexuality and spirituality. Other campaigners who have worked with us, such as Jean Mayland and Colin Coward, have shared their own insights in ways which have enriched all of us who have come into contact with them. If these contributions are mostly at the level of vision and inspiration, rather than practicality, they are none the worse for that. We need vision and inspiration.

Yet for the most part, when it comes to the nitty-gritty expression of work and witness within the Churches, these people have felt obliged to prioritise specific issues rather than to focus on the work of CSCS. At a time when the Anglican Communion (at least) is torn apart on the gay issue and still struggling over women bishops – and when, as we understand, the campaign for married priests within the Roman Catholic Church may be gaining new impetus - that may seem a very rational choice. And we were reminded at the AGM that even the major single-issue organisations, such as LGCM, can have difficulty finding trustees and activists. It is most understandable that those who feel called to work in these areas should give them priority, particularly with Lambeth 2008 coming up. Yet there must surely be others – and not least people in other denominations – who can see the longer-term need for the work CSCS is trying to do?

If not, then your Committee will simply do what it can over the next year.

Meanwhile, we are actively following up the idea of further contact with theological educators. After a lot of discussion about the ideas expressed at the AGM, we feel that this should be the priority, and that the broader idea of a network and conference of all organisations in our field should wait until we have seen what such a network and conference might contribute to the educational effort. We are most grateful to Christina for having steered us so firmly in this direction, and hope to report progress in the next issue!

Apart from AGM-related material, this issue includes a book review by Martin Pendergast, and also – by kind permission of *The Tablet* – an article by Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP which goes to the very heart of our theological endeavour. Many will feel grateful that that article, from the heart of the Roman Catholic Church, widens the theological debate and relates it to other matters dear to many of our hearts. Perhaps some will feel that Fr Timothy still gives sexual activity a theological significance which is more “essentialist” than that put forward for example by Jo Ind in *Memories of Bliss* – and may be even further removed from the assumptions behind the work of David Brown which we featured in our last issue. There is room here for a debate on these pages, as long as CSCS and this Newsletter continue to exist. So send us your thoughts!

But please do not assume that our continuing activity means that CSCS can be taken for granted. So far as we can see at present, **from next February we will have no Chair, no Secretary and no Treasurer, and therefore cannot carry on.** Your Committee continue to hope and pray that new supporters will come forward. If not, then despite the encouragement of Christina and others CSCS will simply have to bow out, in the faith that the mantle of our work will be assumed by other organisations.

Anthony Woollard

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY AND SEXUALITY

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING HELD ON SATURDAY 9
FEBRUARY 2008 AT ST ANNE'S CHURCH, SOHO**

Present

Jane Fraser (Chair)

Daphne Cook (Treasurer)

John Cook

Martin Pendergast

Hugh Bain

Hazel Barkham

Tony Crowe

Mike Egan

Ruth Whittard

Anthony Woollard

Apologies

John Gladwin, Roberta Rominger, David Gamble, Peter Selby, Pat Ward-Platt.

Minutes of AGM held on 10 February 2007

These having been circulated in *CSCS News No 32* were agreed. There were no matters arising not elsewhere on the agenda.

Treasurer's Report

The accounts for 2007 are attached. Daphne Cook drew attention to the loss on the 2007 Annual Conference arising from the decision to have three speakers. Income from subscriptions continued to reduce, though a substantial donation from the Modern Churchpeople's Union, representing a share of the surplus of the joint conference in 2006, largely made up the shortfall. No tax reclaim had yet been made for 2007; once that had been done, the deficit on the year should be largely made good. The sum remaining in the funds would be more than sufficient to meet any foreseeable liabilities for the journal *Theology and Sexuality*.

Tony Crowe proposed, and John Cook, seconded, the adoption of the accounts. All were in favour.

Chair's Report

This had been circulated and is appended to these minutes. Jane Fraser emphasised the problem arising from her decision and that of the Cooks to stand down following the 2009 AGM.

Future plans, including the Chair's proposal for a conference of all organisations concerned with faith, sexuality and justice, were discussed. Points raised included the following:

- CSCS should not be afraid of continuing to be a very small ginger group. As Christina Rees had pointed out in her address to the Annual Conference, no other organisation had quite the same mission as CSCS.
- There was a continuing need for dialogue with theological educators. The attempt to interest colleges and networks by mailing out copies of *CSCS News* had produced no visible response, but the need was still there. It could be useful to discuss the way forward with sympathetic leading educators such as Martin Percy (Cuddesdon) and Nicola Slee (Queen's), and other networks and non-Anglican educational institutions (such as Susan Durber at the URC college in Cambridge and the new Principal at Woodbrooke) should not be neglected. It might be possible to develop teaching and learning materials, and/or a "roadshow", to contribute to theological education – which could be a permanent legacy if CSCS were in due course to be wound up. It was conceivable that the Faith Communities Small Grants Scheme or some similar trust could be tapped for the additional resources needed for such an endeavour.
- The conference proposal could also be worth pursuing but could take over a year to set up, thus going beyond the "life" of the present Committee. Whilst it might seem desirable to develop the interfaith dimension, following on the 2007 Annual Conference, it was important not to take on too much at once when CSCS had so few resources in terms of activists.

The meeting encouraged the Committee to pursue these thoughts.

Election of Committee

In the absence of any new nominations, Tony Crowe proposed, and Hazel Barkham seconded, that the existing Committee be re-elected en bloc. All were in favour.

Appointment of independent examiner of accounts

John Cook proposed, and Tony Crowe seconded, that Mike Egan be re-appointed. All were in favour.

REPORT FROM THE CHAIR FOR THE AGM OF CSCS 9TH FEBRUARY 2008

Over the past year, CSCS has struggled to meet its aims of providing opportunities for sexuality to be discussed honestly and openly and to help others in the churches to provide similar opportunities. This has been limited largely to the medium of the CSCS Newsletter and the distribution of the Journal, *Theology and Sexuality*. However, your committee has continued to meet quarterly to discuss policy, topics of relevance to our aims and the interests of our membership, items for the Newsletter and finance. In addition to these meetings there has been regular contact and discussion through the medium of email. We are grateful for the generous hospitality of John and Daphne Cook for these meetings and Daphne's diligent oversight of membership fees and CSCS finances. Anthony Woollard continues to double as minutes secretary and editor of CSCS News. Martin Pendergast keeps us in touch with other networks facing similar concerns to ours and is a valuable link with the Roman Catholic Church.

The two-tier membership subscription introduced last year is working well but neither this development nor other initiatives have been successful in encouraging new

members and numbers have therefore remained static. This, combined with the lack of active involvement of members other than those serving on the committee, has led to our opening up a debate on the possibility of re-thinking the future of CSCS as a stand-alone organisation. We launched, in the last Newsletter, the possibility of forming instead a collaborative group of small, radical, Christian organisations concerned to move forward the Church's thinking on sexuality issues. We were therefore delighted that Christina Rees, a founder member of CSCS and a well-known campaigner in the field of women's ministry, agreed to address our Annual Conference this year to give us a critical evaluation and personal perspective on CSCS.

We are also grateful for the support and encouragement from our Patrons, The Revd. David Gamble, Co-ordinating Secretary, Legal & Constitutional Practice in the Methodist Church, The Revd. Roberta Rominger, Moderator of the Thames North Synod of the United Reformed Church and The Rt Revd. John Gladwin, Anglican Bishop of Chelmsford. Each has written to comment on our future plans and to express their regret that they were not to be able to attend today. They have sent us their good wishes for this event.

We continue to develop our links with other Christian organisations with agendas that overlap with our aims. Two of our committee members serve on the Council of the Modern Churchpeople's Union, Anthony Woollard as an elected member and your Chair as a CSCS observer, together with other CSCS members, including Jean Mayland. We maintain links with Inclusive Church to our mutual benefit and their briefing papers and monthly newsletter keep us informed of many issues relating to our aims. Martin Pendergast was actively involved in the LGCM conference on homophobia last year and is also a valuable link with developments in the Catholic Church. Your Chair is active on the General Synod of The Church of England where, as you know, there is a continuing, lively (and sometimes acrimonious) debate on the role of gay clergy in the priesthood and of women in the episcopate. She is also active in raising concern within church congregations on the problem of teenage pregnancy and sexuality issues relating to people with disabilities.

Anthony Woollard continues to play an active role in the production of the CSCS Newsletter, both as commissioning editor and as a stimulating contributor. We are grateful for his oversight of current issues of concern to the membership and his ability to stimulate lively debate among the membership. We have been given an insight into a perspective on sexual surrogate partner therapy by one of our members, David Brown, who has both challenged and stimulated our thinking on the needs of those facing sexual problems and dysfunctions. Another member, Henry Mayor, has updated us on the difficulties facing gay and lesbian Christians in Kenya and what he has achieved in opening up dialogue with members of the Anglican Church in that country. We are also aware of similar work being undertaken by Colin Coward through Changing Attitude – with whom we maintain active links.

Our thanks are due to Daphne Cook, in her capacity as our Treasurer, for drawing up the end of year accounts for us and for keeping us within our budget. Thanks are also due to Michael Egan for auditing the accounts.

We are also grateful to Philip Gardner for his continued work on updating the CSCS website despite other pressures on his time and expertise.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the membership who contribute to the aims of CSCS by encouraging education and informed debate on the issues around Christianity and sexuality within your church communities and congregation.

The Revd. Canon Jane Fraser

**THE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CHRISTIANITY AND SEXUALITY
ACCOUNTS YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2007**

	2007	2006
Income		
Subscriptions	£1522.50	£1903.00
Conference Fees	£ 325.00	£ 312.50
Interest Receivable	£ 21.22	£ 18.43
Tax Refund	£ 0.00	£ 879.13
Donations	£ 435.00	
Total	£2303.72	£ 3113.06
Expenditure		
Journals	£1495.83	£1080.00
CSCS News	£ 384.26	£ 296.56
Conference	£ 736.16 ¹	£ 209.58
Website	£ 159.80	£ 155.10
Committee/Secretarial	£ 132.87	£ 118.70
Total	£2908.92	£1859.94
Surplus (shortfall)	£ (605.20)	£1253.12
Opening accumulated fund	£4145.32	£2892.30
Closing accumulated fund	£3540.12	£4145.32
Represented by		
Current Account	£1455.30	£2067.49
Deposit Account	£2084.82	£2077.83
	£3540.12	£4145.32

THE JOY OF GIVING OURSELVES

The Church's teaching on sexuality is based on natural law, but the former Master of the Dominicans argues that a Christian vision of sexuality can also embrace another kind of sexual ethic derived from Jesus' gift of himself at the Last Supper

In Ireland 50 years ago, it was notorious that the clergy used to try to regulate kisses. People were told how long they could kiss, maybe 10 seconds if they were under

¹ Of which £216.00 relates to 2008 conference.

18. And there were rules about what sorts of kisses were allowed. (The most dangerous kiss of all was known as the French kiss.) But it is better to reflect upon what a kiss says. The body is made to be communicative, and the face is the apex of the body's communication. The face shows what it means to be bodily, and the mouth, speaking and kissing, expresses the culmination of communication.

When we think of Christianity and sexuality, then people usually ask what is permitted or forbidden. What sexual activity is permitted between people who are not married? Can people of the same sex have a sexual relationship? This is to start at the wrong place. The first question in all ethics is: "What does my behaviour say?" Ethics is learning to behave to each other so that we relate ever more deeply. An action is not bad because it is forbidden but because it undermines human communion, though if it obviously does do that, then it may be good to forbid it.

It is natural that when Jesus wishes to express the utter communion of God and humanity, then he does so by giving his body. He is not giving us a lump of matter. He is making a sign that speaks and creates communion. And Jesus says that this body is given for you. It is gift. This may be incomprehensible because for the last 400 years we have tended to think of bodies as possessions. If one thinks that one's body is fundamentally an important possession, then of course one can do what one likes with it, as long as it harms no one else. The result has been a sexual ethic that has often been founded on rights regarding possessions. Usually a man was seen as owning not only his own body but also the body of his wife. He could do what he liked with her, though she did not possess his body in the same way. Adultery by the woman was seen as a form of robbery since in sleeping with another man she would be unlawfully disposing of her husband's property.

When Jesus gave us his body, he was expressing the deepest meaning of what it is to be a body. To be a body is to receive all that this body is from one's parents and their parents before them. It is ultimately to receive one's being from God. Our existence is a gift in every moment. God gives me being now. So our sexual relations should be expressive of the gift of oneself to another, and the acceptance of the gift which is the being of the other person.

Jesus' words at the Last Supper take us to the heart of a sexual ethic. Sexuality is about communion; it speaks. And what it should express is mutual generosity, the giving and the receiving of gifts. But the Last Supper was also the moment at which Jesus faced and embraced the contradiction of communion. On that night he shared himself with Judas who had sold him, with Peter who would shortly deny him, and with the other disciples who would mostly run away. It was the dark night, when there was betrayal, lies, fear, violence and death. On that night Jesus faces all that subverts and destroys human communion. He faced and transcended it.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of hope, because on that night, when there was apparently nothing to hope for, Jesus performed this astonishing gift of himself. And Christian sexual ethics should help us to live with hope, in the face of our own failures and denials and betrayals of each other. Christian sexual ethics teaches us to speak truthfully with our bodies, and to overcome the lies that we may sometimes tell. When you have sexual intercourse with someone, you say with your body, "I give myself to you, without reserve, now and for ever, and I receive all of you as a gift." But if we

get up the next morning and leave a note by the bed saying, “Thanks for the pleasurable sex, but I never wish to see you again”, then we have, in a sense, lied with our bodies. It is as if we were to say “I love you eternally” and then walk away for ever. We need to touch each other truthfully, to mean what we say when we kiss. We need to live out the deep meaning of what we do with each other’s bodies.

But if a Christian sexual ethics is to be hopeful, then it must teach us how to say the words that heal the wounds when we lie. We need to find the words that break the silence and which restore communion. It is not enough just to go to confession and get absolution. We need to give and receive absolution from each other. To live one’s sexuality truthfully means also that we find ways to overcome the lies and heal the hurts.

Bad sexual behaviour is usually linked with domination and violence. All over the world today, one can see the violence that often accompanies sex. War is always associated with the rape of women, but women are daily forced to submit to the domination of men, who force them to have sex. As John Paul II said, a man may rape even his own wife. Millions of children are forced into sex with foreign tourists in Thailand and the Philippines. Whenever dominance is introduced into a sexual relationship, then the heart of our sexuality is denied. The Last Supper teaches us that the heart of a Christian sexual ethics is the renunciation of violence. We seek mutuality and equality. When someone desires the body of another person, then that desire should not be rapacious, seeking to take possession of the body, as if it were a piece of meat to be devoured. We must learn to desire in a way that delights in the other, that treasures their vulnerability, that takes pleasure in their very existence. We must delight in another as God delights in us, tenderly and without dominion.

If a good sexual relationship overcomes the distortions of power, reaching for equality and mutuality, then it is a preaching of the Gospel to the society in which we live. It challenges the unjust power structures of every society.

So often relationships merely echo the patterns of dominance of the society. If society is ruled by men, then men will probably rule in the home and in the bed. So a good sexual ethics offers a challenge that is implicitly political. If we are formed in our homes for reciprocity, then we will not beat home in political structures that oppress.

At the heart of a Christian sexual ethics is fidelity. The typical form that this has taken throughout Christian history has been through the marriage vows, when a husband and a wife pledge mutual fidelity until death. This has become much more difficult in our society, in which people live much longer, and are more mobile. Marriage is a fragile institution. In fact in our society no bonds are as secure as they used to be. We live in a society of short- term contracts, whether at work or at home. And this creates immense problems for couples whose marriages have broken down and who find themselves in “irregular situations”.

Fidelity is much deeper than simply not getting divorced. It is offering a context in which people take the time to belong to another, to see the other and be seen. One needs courage to remain with another when they begin to see one’s weakness. The Eucharist invites us to endure infidelity, when we are exposed in all our fragility. There is a deep link between sex and death. In the Old Testament, the begetting of

children was the principal hope of immortality. One would be immortal in the memory of one's offspring. So sexuality was our defiance of death. That is why one had a duty to raise children for one's brother if he were to die without issue.

Sex and death are still linked today. For most of Christian history, the bearing of children was a time of extreme danger for women. And now there is the link with Aids, especially for women in poor countries, where they may have no control over when and with whom they have sex.

So what can a Christian sexuality offer us in the face of death? It is not just the delegated immortality of children, though that does indeed reveal the profound creativity of human sexuality in the face of mortality. Also we give our bodies to each other as an act of love which is stronger than death. The Song of Songs says, "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is as strong as death" (8: 6). But in Christ, love is stronger than death. Sexual relations should express that love of the Father for the Son which defeats our old enemy. Our society is both obsessed with sex yet lacks a deep exploration of its meaning. When the Church does articulate a vision of sexuality it is usually in terms of the natural law. This has its own usefulness and beauty, and I do not wish to dismiss it at all, but it carries the danger that the sex may then be seen reductively, in terms of the production of children. Sexuality must be placed again in the complex context of human communication, with its defeats and victories.

On the night before he died, Jesus gave us his body and this invites us to a deeper understanding of what it might mean to offer our body to another person. Sexuality speaks of a relationship that is founded in the giving and receiving of gifts. At the heart of sexuality is gratitude and generosity. Sexual intercourse is the transmission of the gift of our being, and so a profound expression of what it means to be human.

*Timothy Radcliffe OP is the former Master of the Dominicans. This is an edited version of an essay included in Christianity and Sexuality in the Time of Aids, a collection of essays just published by Continuum (ed Lytta Basset & Timothy Radcliffe, ISBN 9780826499110, £10.99.) It was first published in *The Tablet* (www.thetablet.co.uk) and is reproduced by kind permission.*

BOOK REVIEW

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church - Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus. The Columba Press 2007, £12.99

If there is a phrase to sum up Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's explosive book, it is this: "Confront power and sex in the Church; don't manage it!" One of the major problems bedeviling the Roman Catholic Church in recent years has been that its management of matters sexual has been to sweep it all under the carpet, be it abuse crises, clergy celibacy, increasing social and theological dissent on issues of sexual orientation, or reproductive health.

Too ready to point the finger at other Christian Churches trying to struggle more honestly and openly with these matters, the Vatican appears increasingly

to ignore not just ‘the elephant in the room’, but a whole herd of them! Attempts to regulate human sexuality through prescriptive directives wrongly focus on individual behaviour, rather than the cultivation of healthy and holy relationships. They define people by their sexual characteristics rather than understanding human sexuality and its manifestations as integral to the development of human personality.

Geoffrey Robinson was an Auxiliary Bishop in the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney from 1984 until his retirement in 2004. In 1994 he took responsibility, on behalf of the Australian Catholic bishops, for coordinating their response to growing sexual abuse allegations, and was co-chair of this committee from 1997 until 2003. It is said that a precipitating reason for his retirement was his inability to work with his conservative Archbishop, Cardinal George Pell, himself accused of cover-up allegations, as well as other unsubstantiated accusations. (1)

There were those who criticised Robinson for not speaking out as an active bishop, leaving publication of this book until after he had retired. It becomes clear to anyone bothering to read “Confronting Power & Sex ...” that a fundamental reason for this was that he was only able to write the book after he had dealt therapeutically with the coming to terms of his own experience of sexual abuse, as a boy. That said, this is no raging victim, railing at either his abuser, or the social or ecclesiastical institutions that have protected them. This is a faithful and committed bishop who wishes to see the body of Christ, the people of God, as it is meant to be.

Robinson sees the sexual abuse crisis as the immediate challenge to be grasped but recognises that this is but a symptom of a pathologically dysfunctional system. In his analysis, echoed by others such as the American Jesuit clinical psychologist J.A Loftus (2), the sexual abuse crisis was a disaster waiting to happen for a Church where the exercise of centralised, hierarchical power and authority had failed to be “received” by people in the pews, including many of the Church’s bishops and priests. In such abuses of power, institutionalised in the Church’s ‘modernised’ corporate structures, the sin has to be “named”.

Robinson’s book is a work of popularisation at its best. He takes us back to the original vision behind Roman Catholic Church reforms envisaged by the 2nd Vatican Council, reaffirming the insights of critical biblical and theological scholarship, and the principles behind a pastoral ministry consistent with those foundations. This, of itself, is a valuable exercise in a Church which currently seems to be seeking pre-Vatican 2 forms of retrenchment. He questions calmly the basis of current teachings on sexual ethics within a framework of broader ethical principles with as much attention given to property as to purity ethics in scripture and tradition:

“If the Catholic Church is to regain some credibility after the many scandals of sexual abuse, it must first learn to speak with humility, intelligence, realism and compassion about all aspects of human sexuality.”

Rightly giving prominence to a person-centred ethic and the centrality of a fully-rounded, informed conscience, Robinson might disappoint many readers by giving only one answer to the huge number of questions he raises: a change of heart and mind. Nevertheless, at the end of each chapter, he offers a succinct meditation on key-points which might serve as useful material for small group discussion, reflection, and action.

“What is needed is an open and honest discussion of such matters by the whole church. When I see this ... taking place, I will believe that the church is serious about confronting abuse. Until that happens, I cannot have this conviction. Change in external structures can help, but they cannot of themselves produce a new church.”

(1) ‘Bishop admits abuse money offer’, BBC News 3 June 2002; ‘Catholic Church in fresh abuse row’, BBC News, 20 August 2002.

(2) ‘Aftermath of Abuse’ in *Opening Up - Speaking Out in the Church*, ed. J. Filochowski & P. Stanford, reviewed in CSCS News 28, Winter 2005.

Martin Pendergast

**This Newsletter is produced for CSCS
The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality**

Chair and principal point of contact:

The Revd Canon Jane Fraser

The Campanile

Church Lane

Stoulton

Worcestershire

WR7 4RE

Tel: 01905 840266

e-mail: cscs@revjane.demon.co.uk

Website: <http://www.cscs.co.uk>

**The next issue is expected in Autumn 2008 – contributions invited by
1 September**

Please send any enquiries about/contributions to the Newsletter to:

Anthony Woollard

1 Chestnut Walk

STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

CV37 6HG

Phone/fax: 01789 204923

e-mail: awoollard@joyousgard.org.uk.

