My name is Maria Roberts and I was voted in as President of the London Natural History Society at the AGM on 10 December 2020.



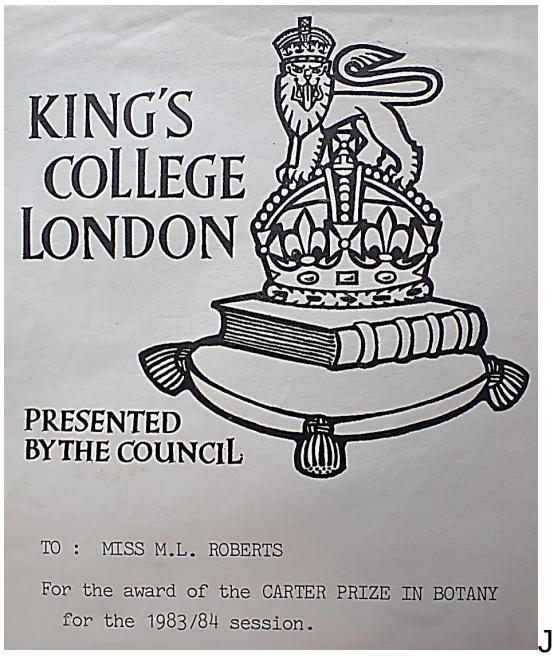
I'm aware I'm following in the footsteps of many illustrious naturalists which is a bit daunting. But I'm delighted to take on this role at this interesting time and to encourage the society to continue its excellent work. I hope we will be able to try new things too, whilst taking our membership with us.

The society is 162 years old and traces its roots back to June 1858, when the Haggerstone Entomological Society – one of our predecessors - was founded. I also want to acknowledge our other predecessor, which is close to my own heart, the Clapton Naturalists' Field Club founded in 1886 by four boys at the Grocers' Company School in Hackney not far from where I live. A society founded by young people with a broad interest in natural history is an inspiring idea behind today's London Natural History Society.

None of the work of the society can be done alone. We have a fantastic team of people at all levels – the recorders, the chairs of the sections and committees, the committee members, the trustees, the secretary, the treasurer, the assistant treasurer responsible for membership, the librarians, the conservation officer, those involved in producing our high-quality publications – the London Bird Report, the London Naturalist and the Newsletter – and people working on our social media presence and our website. They are truly an amazing team. And we always need more volunteers to get involved so please do get in touch. We need people with a range of skills – not just experts in natural history.

My time with the LNHS

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Just to introduce myself to those who don't know me. I am a long-standing member of the London Natural History Society and have regularly served on Council as a trustee. I am also a member of the Botany Committee and previously the Administration and Finance Committee too. I've attended talks and field meetings run by all the sections of the society and believe I have a good overview of its great work.

I studied for a BSc in Plant Science at Kings College London and was awarded the Carter Medal and I have a BA in Humanities with Art History from the Open University. I think that's a helpful combination which enables me to consider matters from different perspectives.

In my work, I have been teaching young school children for over 30 years and fostered their interest in and knowledge of the natural world. I have managed other staff, collaborated with a range of professionals, and received awards for my mentoring of students.



I have seen the enforced switch to virtual activity as an opportunity for the society and I was instrumental in getting the virtual talks programme established. I understand the particular difficulties some people face in this pandemic from

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personal experience and I also appreciate that not everyone can easily get to meetings even in more typical times.

I have a pivotal role in the virtual talks team organising and liaising with speakers, setting up the talks on Eventbrite and acting as host on the day. I have also run pre-meetings to support speakers and worked hard to ensure the virtual AGMs were a success. I have collaborated successfully with other members of the society on this project and am always appreciative of the work of others. I offer common sense advice on a range of issues and I'm open to new ideas and encourage participation.

What would I like to see for the LNHS 2021?

The signs are looking good for a resumption of field meetings and workshops etc at some stage next year which is great – and I'm sure we're all looking forward to these and to getting out into the natural world and learning more about the aspects that most interest us.



However, we don't want to lose sight of the role that virtual events can continue to play so I want to see a permanent virtual talks programme in place. In fact, we are just putting the finishing touches to an ambitious and exciting programme for the whole of 2021. This is going to be an amazing offer to members and an effective way of improving our outreach work. We will also be exploring the possibility of blended events enabling both in-person and virtual involvement.

The society should be welcoming to both beginners and experienced naturalists and should attract a diverse group of people, who engage with the natural world in a serious but enjoyable way.

Click here to check out the LNHS Virtual natural History Talk series

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I'd like to see an increase in membership by at least 50 by the end of 2021 and better retention of new members. We also want to have regular communication with our members by a variety of means including email, via the website and through social media as well as face to face. As part of this we will want to continue to improve our website.

We need to fill key positions in the organisation – possibly on a rota basis – and we need to think about the long-term success of the society. Part of this involves attracting more younger people as attendees and active members. This is essential for the long-term future of our society and also an important way in which expertise can be shared. We will also be launching a regular grant-awarding programme.



I'd like to see increasing collaboration between sections within the society and also even better links with other societies including university-based ones. We will also be thinking about recording and the ways we collect and share our records.

Then there are some facilities which we offer which I'd like to see members using more (once this becomes possible). One is our library – it's a fantastic and well-stewarded resource, but it's underused by members. Another is our reading circle – which enables members to access a range of publications. And it should be possible to review the journals we make available and possibly add to these depending on what members want.

One thing we really must do is to revive the Bookham Common Survey section. This is an important survey which was first promoted in 1941 with work beginning in earnest in the following year. So, 2021 will be the 80th Anniversary of its inception and we are going to mark the occasion by getting this section active again. We know people often don't have much time to spare so we're going to make this as easy as possible, but we do need people to get involved so please help us.

[Click here to find out more about the Bookham Common Survey]

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We do have at least two major projects underway. One is the production of a new atlas on the butterflies of London. This is eagerly anticipated and is progressing well so watch this space! I also hope we can make progress on our new London Flora in 2021. Producing a new Flora involves a great deal of work but we are pleased that we now have lots of data – both recent and historic – in a usable form, so the signs are good.

I also want us to agree Health and Safety and Safeguarding policies for the society. I accept that doesn't sound wildly exciting, but we do want to keep everyone involved with the society safe in all senses of the word, and as a responsible charity we need to get these policies in place.

And finally, for 2021 I'd like to emphasise that we'd like feedback and dialogue with members about what they want and we want to increase the sense of engagement. We want more members to volunteer and to contribute to the society and we want them to tell us what's working and what's not working.



To close I'd like to say how much I've appreciated keeping a sense of connection with the natural world during this challenging year. I've been pretty limited in what I've been able to do but watching the local Foxes and the Ring-necked Parakeets, hearing the first Swifts, lifting up an old brick and finding what I now know is

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Common Shiny Woodlouse, and exploring the local pavement weeds have all given me considerable pleasure. Hopefully I'll be able to do more next year. I'm illustrating this article with a couple of my pavement weed finds: Narrow-leaved Ragwort *Senecio inaequidens* which is a neophyte from southern Africa now well established in East London and the archaeophyte Dwarf Mallow *Malva neglecta* which also seems to be doing well.

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To contact Maria, please see the **Contact Us page**.

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