

Essex Branch of the Historical Association: Chair's Report, Sept. 2026 (Agenda Item 3)

This time last year, Ian Mason, veteran of the Historical Association nationally and locally, was in his usual ebullient form and re-elected as Vice-Chair. Four days later he died suddenly. At our October meeting his daughter Amy spoke movingly about him. Let us remember Ian as we start another season.

The 2025-26 programme attracted excellent numbers and a huge increase in branch membership. Our average attendance was 67 (up 35%) and we ended the year with 92 branch members (up 113%). This has left our finances in a very healthy situation. Thank you to the many branch members who agreed to sign up early for the new season to ease the administrative pressure before the AGM and to the increased numbers who have made electronic bank transfers.

For the large attendance we must, firstly, acknowledge skilled programme compilation by Martin Frampton, our Programme Secretary. The number of phone calls and emails are enormous and he is always a year or two ahead of the game. He also reacts quickly to a crisis. Professor Corinne Fowler had to cancel in April because of a serious family illness. Martin asked the speaker scheduled for this coming November, Andy Stuart, to step in with his talk on the Russian Civil War and Corinne has kindly reciprocated by filling the vacated November slot with her talk on Country Walks through Colonial Britain. So, we have ended up with all the right talks but not necessarily in the right order.

Secondly, our publicity seems to work. Firstly, via our own website; secondly, using flyers in Chelmsford's Museum, Essex Record Office and the city's eight libraries as well as in the libraries of twelve towns with good public transport links to Chelmsford; thirdly our direct email links with a wide range of U3As, WEAs, civic societies and local historical and family history societies, plus the University of Essex, all continue to bear fruit. Thank you to all these groups for responding so helpfully.

Thirdly, the Committee does great work behind the scenes and we particularly thank former Treasurer Andy Moir who is now standing down from the Committee after more than 20 years though he will still operate our website and social media accounts.

Now we need your view on the equitability of the £20 branch membership rate for couples at the same address, compared to £15 for individuals. It has been raised by one of our members.

The arrangement dates from the pre-email era when we had to communicate by post and couples cost us less. But we now live in the age of email. Only seven of the 46 HA branches still have the 'couple' provision. The law advises that, with the growth of equality legislation, we should not refer to couples but to 'two people living at the same address'. This will encompass not just marriage but also civil partnerships and those living together who choose not to marry. By extension it must also include parent and adult child, other relatives living together and workmates or friends sharing occupation of a property.

However, we are concerned about the implicit discrimination this brings against similar pairs of family members, friends, workmates etc who do not happen to live under the same roof and therefore pay £15 each. There is also an issue of sensitivity when bereavement or other separation sadly redefines the survivor of a couple as an individual. To ask that person for an increase from a pro rata £10 to £15 is a thankless task that I have not yet been required to undertake.

Finally, there are questions of privacy. It seems inappropriate to enquire into members' living arrangements or relationships as a condition of one sort of membership. So, should we as a branch not follow the Historical Association itself which only offers individual national membership?

We are minded to move to a simple £15 individual branch membership subscription for all from September 2027. Eight or nine talks for £15 is still a great bargain and we feel couples would not mind this adjustment. But there may be issues we have not considered and we would appreciate your views. We suggest this is not debated today at the AGM due to pressure of time but that we give some time for formal discussion at the October and November meetings or, indeed, informally at any time.

Tony Tuckwell, Chair of the Essex Branch of the Historical Association