

## **Parish Magazine – February 2025**

Happy New Year! Very much hoping you have all had a lovely Christmas break and are looking forward to 2025.

It has been a challenging winter so far in terms of weather, with multiple storms and severe winds, leading to site closures for public safety. As you can imagine, this has been hugely frustrating for guests who have had their long-awaited Christmas family experiences disrupted. It is also a massive disappointment for our teams, who work so hard to create and deliver a magical Christmas.

Despite all the challenges, both the Nutcracker in the Castle and Christmas Lights Trail have been very well received by our guests, as has the Nutcracker workshop developed for schools by the Education team. Unbelievably, we now kick into preparations for Christmas 2025 – groups visitors book a year ahead! January is also the time to order themed Christmas shop stock for 2025, for delivery in November.

Light snow and the recent cold snap mean that the grounds and Castle are looking particularly beautiful. I always feel particularly sorry for the ducks and geese on site when the Moat freezes, as they get a nasty shock when they come in to land and end up sliding across the ice at speed!

You will be aware that Leeds Castle is well known for its Black Swan population, a non-native variety imported by Lady Baillie as part of her bird collection. Sadly, we have lost two successive cohorts of Black Swans since 2021, due to repeated outbreaks of the dreadful avian flu.

At the moment, we have one long term Black Swan and a recently acquired mate. Both of them have survived outbreaks of avian flu, so we are hopeful that they have acquired immunity and that their eventual cygnets will also resist the avian flu. Fingers crossed for a healthy batch of cygnets this spring!

The Lakeside Lodges that launched last December have been extremely well received by our guests and have traded ahead of business plan in their first year. People are very much enjoying the panoramic windows over the Great Water, the peace and quiet and the abundant birdlife.

Focus now turns to 2025 activity. Soon it will be February Half Term, when we will be running an event with characters celebrating the return of the Boudin Secretaire (Writing Desk) to its home in the Castle. This item has been purchased with the support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The event is included in 12 month ticket.

Lots of marriage proposals are made over Christmas, so on the weekend of 25<sup>th</sup>/26<sup>th</sup> January, we will be holding our Annual Weddings Showcase. This is an opportunity to see the Castle, Maidens Tower and other venues all set up for weddings and to discuss your own plans with our experienced staff. As well as the more formal venues, we can also offer more relaxed marquee weddings with six different caterers to choose from.

During January we are undertaking plaster repairs around the Castle Gatehouse, as well as work to the East Terrace to prevent water ingress into plant rooms.

Later this year, we will be starting the latest tranche of Castle Stonework Repair, along with some roof repair works. The conservation of ancient buildings is a never ending and expensive task, so, as a charity, we are now seeking external grants to help us with the huge costs of this essential work to conserve heritage for the future. Works will run from 6<sup>th</sup> October 2025 until April 2026.

Helen Bonser-Wilton, Chief Executive