

Members' Weekend 2021

Chesford Grange Hotel, Kenilworth



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Members' Weekend 2021: it's back and better than ever

From shedding tears as Members told their emotional stories as part of Making Generation R, through to banter and laughter as others threw axes and fired arrows around the garden (safely supervised!), Members' Weekend 2021 brought out the full range of emotions.

This supplement gives a glance into it all. We have messages from Chairman, General Sir Adrian Bradshaw (p04), who was overwhelmed by the number of "Members helping Members" as they mustered for the first time in a long while. There are also words from Blesma's Chief Executive, Jon Bryant (p05), who was grateful to experience that famous Blesma camaraderie at his debut Members' Weekend.

Talks from Members included Andrew Mead's love of para ice hockey; a game he claims literally anyone can play and gives a cast-iron guarantee they will get addicted to (p06), and an insight into the arduous Race Across America from Alex Krol (p07). There are updates from Making Generation R and Team Endeavour powerboat racing (p08) and tips on how to improve your health and fitness through Blesma's Fitness and Lifestyle Course (p09).

The weekend's taster activities – from gift wrapping to golf to Tai Chi – are covered from p12, and you can find out what other Members thought of the event on p18. All in all, it's the perfect guide to what was, without doubt, the perfect Members' Weekend.

If you didn't join this year, why not register your interest for 2022?



A word from the Padre

The Reverend Professor Philip McCormack was on hand once again this year to lead the Service of Dedication for the eleventh time

How does it feel to be back?

Just great. I've been doing this service with Blesma for 11 years now, and it's a weekend that I always try to keep sacrosanct because I meet with friends – with a family of those who have served. The charity is as vibrant as ever, and I find that wonderful.

You're a former military man...

Yes, my service goes back to 1981, when I served in the Ulster Defence Regiment as a soldier, an SEO and

an officer. After that, I served for more than 20 years as a chaplain in the Royal Army Chaplain's Department. So that makes Blesma a charity that is very close to my heart.

And you were awarded the MBE...

Yes. I got the award for my pastoral care and leadership to 19 Brigade before, during, and after Herrick 10.





Words: Nick Moore Photography: Andy Bate



A word from the Chairman: General Sir Adrian Bradshaw



General Sir Adrian Bradshaw reflects on Covid, candid conversations, and lessons learned over the weekend

What were your overall impressions of the weekend?

It was incredibly inspiring. For the first time in two years, all these people got back together, and they were delighted to see each other. Immediately, I noticed the things that always happen when our Members get together – they were sharing hints, tips and guidance, and helping each other out. I hear the most incredibly inspiring stories and am shown that Blesma holds some wonderful activities. It reminded me what a thriving organisation this is.

You were very keen to reinforce the 'Member helping Member' philosophy

Yes. There is a fun side to Members' Weekend, with the evening meal and the activities, but there is also a serious side because every Member is here for a reason – usually because they've been grievously injured in some way. We see how people recover, embrace life, and get on with things. Often, that inspires others to do things they might not have done otherwise. We see it all across the weekend, and it is a lesson for everyone.

Have any moments stood out for you?

I really appreciate the conversations I have with the Members as I am quietly reminded of everything the charity does. When you're a Trustee or part of the management team, there is a lot to get to grips with and it can

be challenging. Coming to this event recharges your energy cells and you leave with a renewed determination – because the Association and all of its Members do that for themselves and each other on a daily basis.

How do you reflect on the last 18 months and how might Covid change Blesma as we hopefully move forward into a more recognisable world?

What we've realised is that a lot of the online activities we have included

“COMING TO THIS EVENT RECHARGES YOUR ENERGY CELLS. YOU LEAVE DETERMINED TO DO YOUR BEST FOR THIS ORGANISATION”

have been really inspiring. We have had great feedback from so much of this virtual work and the courses that have been run. The circumstances have also meant that we've had to learn so much about bringing ourselves together online, how to do that, and what works best.

We now know that digital is not simply an 'either-or' alternative to the old way of doing things...

Exactly; it is an add-on, a bonus. Now we can run both face-to-face and online activities, and in that way we will be able to enrich people's lives even more than we used to. The whole weekend has been fantastic for realising that. So many great ideas have been exchanged, and this is the energy that keeps the organisation going and growing.





The Chief Executive: Jon Bryant



his was Jon Bryant's first Members' Weekend since he became Chief Executive in early 2020.

It certainly lived up to his expectations

What did you want to get out of your first Members' Weekend?

I've been the Chief Executive for 19 months, and when I joined Blesma, the thing I was looking forward to most was meeting the membership. I wanted to try to understand what the Members needed and what we could deliver. Most of all, I wanted to experience the ethos and Blesma camaraderie that I'd heard so much about. But, of course, it didn't work out like that: my first Blesma event was just three months ago, and this is only my third. So, most of all, it has been an absolute pleasure to finally meet people face to face.

It can't have been easy to arrange...

We took quite a big risk organising this – we couldn't have done the event in June as lockdown wouldn't have allowed it. We put in a provisional booking in the hope that the situation might develop favourably. The weekend was exactly what I wanted it to be.

How did you risk-manage the event?

We insisted that people were tested for Covid, and 'insist' isn't a word I use very often. We really had to minimise the risk, and the fact that almost 185 people out of the 190 who had initially booked a place at Members' Weekend managed to make it along was amazing given the circumstances.



What kind of feedback have you had?

Everyone I met said they were delighted to have attended. There was a terrific atmosphere. It will have been the biggest event most of us have attended in the last 18 months, so people made the most of it – you could see that from

the fact that people came from all over the country. Everyone was so keen to get involved.

Any personal highlights?

I enjoyed so many elements of the weekend. The memorial service was excellent because it set the tone for what followed. It was really good to put Members in front of Members to tell their stories. There was a nice rhythm to the weekend. It had its serious side with the service and the talks, the fun bit with everyone having a drink, and an important educational side – and that was reflected in the activities on the Sunday afternoon.

So to summarise: a great success?

Yes. The purpose of the weekend was very simple: to get together. We managed to do just that in the middle of two different national crises: Covid and the petrol shortage. I'd like to thank everyone who came along – it really was something special.



Want to try an activity with adrenaline? Slide this way

Andrew Mead

There are enthusiasts, there are passionate people, and then there is Andrew Mead. Andrew is such a fervent advocate of para ice hockey that he told an amused crowd that if they were to try the sport and weren't satisfied he would "pay for the upbringing of your first two children."

Canada-born, Newcastle-raised Andrew served in the Royal Navy before working as an actor. He lost both legs below the knee following a freak football injury in 2016. Always sporty, he discovered para ice hockey and now plays for Sheffield Steelkings, one of the UK's four main teams (the others are Peterborough Phantoms, Manchester Mayhem and Cardiff Huskies).

What he loves most about the sport is its inclusivity. "There is nobody in this room who cannot play the sport: young, old, disabled, non-disabled, male, female – everybody can have a go at club level," he told an engaged audience.

Competitors propel themselves with a pair of poles, which double as sticks with which they hit the puck. "When you become proficient, you can reach speeds of up to 30 miles per hour. So hitting someone else doing a similar speed is like a small car crash," he says.

Like regular ice hockey, the sport can get physical, but Andrew assured listeners that it is incredibly friendly at both club and international level.

Recent developments have thrown up some exciting opportunities because while previous events have been mixed, there will be a dedicated women's competition at the Winter Paralympic



ParalympicsGB's Andrew Mead in action for the Sheffield Steelkings

Games in Beijing next year. Which is why Andrew made an appeal for both male and female players.

"Gold and silver are already taken by the Americans and Canadians, but for ParalympicsGB's women, there is definitely a bronze medal up for grabs in Beijing. If you can skate from one end of the rink to the other, you could be a medallist," reckons Andrew. "And all the teams in this country are full of friendly people. It's like joining a family!" With Andrew's money-back guarantee, why not give it a try?

To find out more about para ice hockey contact the Activities Team on meo@blesma.org



Blesma gets ready to Race Across America

Alex Krol

The Race Across America, popularly known as RAAM, is billed as ‘The World’s Toughest Bicycle Race’. It sees riders crossing the United States covering a total of 3,000 miles – from Oceanside, California on the west coast to Annapolis, Maryland on the east.

Blesma had entered a team for RAAM 2020, only for the event to be scuppered by the pandemic. The Association has now entered a team for 2022 and is on the lookout for a support crew. A full complement of staff is vital in a race that battles up (and zips down) 175,000 feet in elevation, and crosses 12 states, with one rider having to be on the road at all times.

Alex Krol, a former Royal Marine from Liverpool who has always had an appetite for extreme challenges, gave Members a fascinating talk about the Race Across America.

“What sets the race apart from other challenges is its magnitude,” he says. “It requires a dedicated team of crew and cyclists because it goes through three mountain ranges – the Sierra Nevada, Rockies and Appalachian – in just one week, with temperatures ranging from 5°C to 50°C.

“The support crew will need to draw on their leadership skills to keep the whole team working effectively and efficiently. We’ll have to deal with daily challenges such as illness, mechanics and navigation, so the event will develop each individual; whether that’s with thinking better under pressure, building confidence or understanding team dynamics.”



“It should be an incredible experience,” Alex says of the Race Across America

Alex, who was paralysed from the waist down when a car pulled in front of his motorbike in 2005, will be riding a hand cycle; a variety of other bikes will be used depending on the riders’ needs.

“You might be the driver one day and the navigator the next, and you’ll also need to help myself and Luke – the other hand cycle rider – on and off the

minibus several times a day, for eight days or so,” says Alex. “The responsibility can’t be taken lightly, but it should be an incredible experience.”

To find out more about being part of Blesma’s support crew for the Race Across America, contact the Activities Team on meo@blesma.org

Making Generation R

Tuesday Critchfield

Making Generation R continues to be a huge success story. The programme teaches Members to tell their personal stories in the most effective way – whether theirs is one of battlefield injury, horrific accident or tragic illness – and explain how they fought their way back from their lowest moments. Members then retell their stories in settings such as schools, helping audiences to understand the value of resilience (which is what the 'R' stands for).

Tutor Tuesday Critchfield explained that 94 Members have been trained to date, reaching more than 125,000 people with their talks. Later in the day, the Making Generation R team led a taster session so Members who are interested in

getting involved could learn more – the programme will have space to train another 20 speakers in 2022.

“Those who take part will work with incredible public speaking trainers and theatre practitioners to learn how to craft their personal stories into a 15-minute version,” Tuesday told the audience.



Martin Kettrick told his story as part of the MGR session

Fast fun with Team Endeavour Racing

Brian Hogg



To find out more about any of these activities email meo@blesma.org or call 020 8548 7094

If it's white-knuckle sport you're interested in, then look no further than Team Endeavour Racing. The outfit, partly funded by Blesma, is involved in one of the fastest-growing categories of the powerboating world: Thundercats. These boats were initially developed for surf rescue; weighing around 80kg and with engines capable of 50bhp, they have a higher power-to-weight ratio than Formula 1 cars, and are perfect for rescues in choppy seas.

Brian Hogg (above left) from the team showed videos of Blesma Members skimming across the surf at barely believable speeds, and issued an invitation: anyone fancying a go can come along and see what it's all about.

“We take people who might be in a dark place and give them a focus,” says Brian, “and we've proved to be successful. The racing is very challenging – it's some of the hardest you can do, but we can train you up, and you can get involved in the full series of six races a year.”

Fitness and Lifestyle Course

Jonny Holloway

It's easy to try a crash diet or to hit the gym for a week, but sustaining the effort to see lasting gains is where too many people fail, according to Jonny Holloway, who credits Blesma's Fitness and Lifestyle Course with finally making him feel fit and well again.

"I was lazy and overweight, and just made excuses; telling myself I couldn't do this or that because of my disabilities," Jonny told Members' Weekend. He admitted that he was sceptical of the course. "I thought I would follow it for a month and then go back to my normal routine," he admits.

The difference? This course doesn't aim for quick fixes. Instead, it looks to educate Members so they understand



more about how eating well and taking part in exercise can improve not just their physique, but also their mental health and confidence.

"Learning all this gave me so much knowledge on how to achieve a healthy lifestyle," Jonny says. "The course was great at helping me feel better mentally and physically."



Gaming just got serious

Jack Cummings



Most veterans know their way around a rifle and so might automatically think they'll be a whizz at shoot 'em up computer games like *Call of Duty*. But there's a lot more to computer game competence than a nifty trigger finger according to Jack Cummings, who is part of a Blesma team that competes against other sides in online competitions.

"Some teams earn a lot of money from doing this," says Jack, who has recently competed for Blesma against the Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes, as well as having taken part in matches organised by footballers from Leeds United.

Blesma Members who enjoy teaming up to play *Warzone* and other computer games recently met up socially for a night out, and attended the European Games Expo (EGX), in London the week after Members' Weekend. They're a welcoming crew, according to Jack, so if you're keen to get involved, either virtually or in person, get in touch.





Gala Dinner

Members' Weekend wouldn't quite be the same without the chance to get dressed up

Meeting fellow Members and their partners over dinner has always been one of the highlights of the weekend. We did our fair share of mingling, but if we didn't get around to saying hi, you can still have your say. Let us know what you thought of the event by dropping us a line at editor@blesma.org



GALA DINNER IN PICTURES



Time for everyone to get up, get out and get active

Archery and axe throwing

During their military careers, many Blesma Members will have had to become familiar with all manner of advanced weaponry, but at Members' Weekend they had to get to grips with some pieces of equipment that were a little more rudimentary.

Luckily, instructor Pete Fleming is on hand to explain the art of axe throwing. "You need to aim for a single rotation, a good amount of power, and a subtle flick of the wrist," says Pete with a smile. He also encourages throwers to either grunt loudly or yell 'Have it!' with each throw. That doesn't sound like researched sports science, but everyone gives it a go nonetheless.

Competitors are given three axes each, and as usual among Blesma Members, there is soon a healthy competition brewing. Tony Lloyd (top right) immediately becomes the person to beat, burying a couple of hatchets without problem from his wheelchair. "That was a lot of fun, I really enjoyed it," he says afterwards. "I've been to a few Members' Weekends and every time the staff come up with something a bit different. This year was no exception."

Carole King very much enjoyed the axe throwing, too. "I don't think any of us have done anything like this before," she says. "It's not too difficult, you just have to get used to how to throw it – but I was pleased to hit the target!"

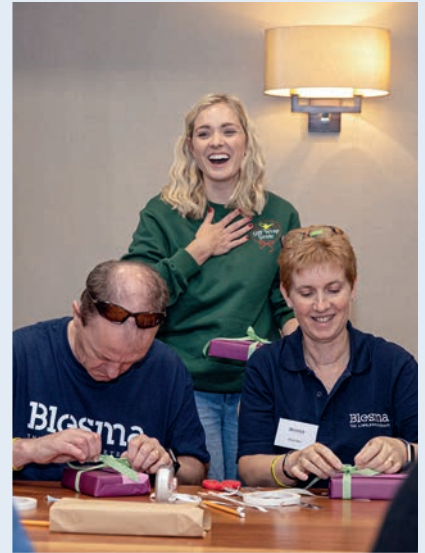
On this sunny Sunday afternoon,



Tony Lloyd (above), Andrew Bracey (left), and Philip Coombes (below) were just a few of the Members who enjoyed testing their marksmanship skills

there is also target shooting and archery on offer in the hotel grounds. Andrew Bracey (above), and his wife Sally in particular, show a penchant for bagging bullseyes with a bow and arrow. "I was pretending my daughters' boyfriends were on that target," jokes Sally, "and I was tempted to find my inner William Tell with the bow and arrow, but I need Andrew to drive me home! Seriously, it's been a lot of fun; I think archery might be our new sport!"





That's the art of gift giving all wrapped up!

Blesma Members are renowned for their helpfulness, camaraderie and good humour, but perhaps not for their gift wrapping skills. Effectively swaddling a box of Maltesers, in fact, was possibly one of the trickier tests that Members had to face over the course of the entire weekend.

Jane Krol (wife of RAAM rider Alex) is here to change all that. She owns a business in Liverpool teaching people how to prepare the perfect parcel, and at Members' Weekend she ran a highly entertaining workshop showing military men and women how to do it, too.

"I think wrapping is one of those love it or hate it things – and I absolutely love it!" she says. "So today we are going to learn how to wrap a basic box, then do some awkward stuff with some really fancy decorations."

Jane learned her skills from her dad, who was the social secretary at his office and had to wrap hundreds of kids' gifts every Christmas. "I've got really nice memories of wrapping gifts, so I want to show people who get really stressed about wrapping that it can actually be quite enjoyable," she says.

Husband Alex, a former Royal Marine, is even becoming a dab hand. "He got

a crash course and then a very firm warning not to mess up his presents any more!" says Jane. The workshop is a favourite: within an hour or so, those boxes of Maltesers have been beautifully wrapped and finished off with elaborate flourishes and a bow. The only thing more fun than wrapping them up? Unwrapping them and eating the contents later!

"WRAPPING IS ONE OF THOSE LOVE IT OR HATE IT THINGS – AND I ABSOLUTELY LOVE IT! I WANT TO SHOW PEOPLE WHO GET STRESSED THAT IT CAN BE QUITE ENJOYABLE"





“YOGA IS JUST BREATHING, STRENGTH AND MOVEMENT. IT’S POWERFUL AND RELEVANT TO EVERYONE”



Yoga and Tai Chi

During the last few difficult years, Blesma has shared ways to reduce stress by running courses on techniques such as breath work and meditation. Foremost among these practices have been yoga and Tai Chi. Both have worked well in a virtual format, with Members learning via Zoom calls, but at Members’ Weekend, people got to try classes out properly.

Yoga’s benefits are well known, with relaxation just one element: increased

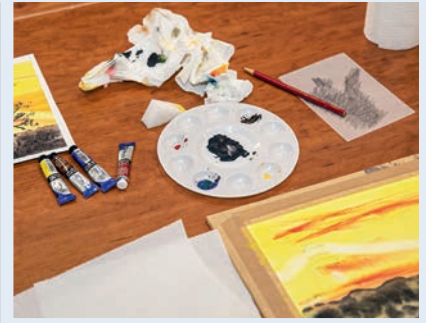
flexibility can also be hugely beneficial to amputees. “I like to look at the big picture of rehabilitation,” explains Lizzie Croxford (top), a yoga teacher and qualified physio, whose husband Stuart is a Member. “Some people don’t want to give yoga a go, but if you take away the title it is really just breathing, movement and strength. It’s powerful and relevant to everyone.”

Tai Chi is less well known but follows similar principles. Essentially a martial

art done slowly, it allows participants to become more aware of their body, control their breath and de-stress. Phil Sheridan and his partner Helen Parsons have been running an online course for Members throughout the year; Phil himself is an amputee and a walking advert for the benefits of his course.

“We don’t promise miracles, but we want to give people the tools to be able to slow down and take a breath when they need to,” Phil says. “Maintaining stability and balance can be difficult for people with limb loss, and Tai Chi is something that can really help with that. We also want to demystify it: we want to show anyone who comes along, even if it is just to watch, that this is a very practical thing that can have a lot of benefits for Members.”

The sessions themselves, held in the hotel’s conference rooms, were a big success, with participants emerging happy and “wound down” – and with several signing on to do future courses.



Painting: time to brush up on those art skill

Enthusiastic but inexperienced Members are presented with a beautiful watercolour of a lighthouse at sunset. The subtle scene of yellows, reds and browns looks as if it is the work of an artistic genius. Can our budding novices reproduce the painting over a single afternoon?

Most of the people sitting around the table will have been thinking: ‘No chance!’ but under the guidance of Ian Lloyd, a former Royal Marine and life-long painting enthusiast, the results are little short of amazing. Slowly but surely, Ian guides them through the special kinds of paper and paint required to create such an image. With brushes and sponges at the ready, the masterpieces gradually come together.

“I’ve run courses and workshops for Blesma for many years, and I just really love introducing people to art,”

says Ian. “We are all working off the same lighthouse picture – a nice sunset – and it’s a good one to try because it shows a great silhouette and has some lovely contrasts in there.

“My first task is to convince them that they can do it, but what always amazes me is that everyone has their own interpretation of the same picture. By the end of the day, we will have 12 different paintings, but they will



all have their own individual qualities.” Like all Blesma activities, the aim of the painting taster is to open up a new world to Members – one that they may keep up when they get home. “I think people like it, certainly nobody has walked out of a class yet!” laughs Ian. “It’s always enjoyable when people see the results – something they thought they couldn’t do – when we display the pictures at the end.”

“I’VE RUN COURSES FOR BLESMA FOR MANY YEARS, AND I JUST LOVE INTRODUCING PEOPLE TO ART. IT’S ALWAYS ENJOYABLE WHEN PEOPLE SEE THE RESULTS”



Something to suit all tastes: from nutrition workshops to a cracking cream tea

The hotel is abuzz with all sorts of activities on Sunday afternoon, and there is plenty of choice for those who don't fancy trying artistic pursuits or hurling axes into slabs of wood.

As popular as ever is the taster session for Making Generation R. Over the years, the programme has proved immensely successful in taking former military folk – some of whom might be very shy or inexperienced in the field of public speaking – and teaching them how to tell their story in public. Led by three professional tutors and a number of experienced MGR alumni, the workshop gets Members thinking

about key moments in their lives and how they could use those to gradually build up a compelling narrative.

“This is just the first phase,” explains tutor Tuesday Critchfield. “If Members decide they'd like to go on and join the project, they'll be put through a thorough training course before they then go on to phase two, in which they deliver their story to different audiences. It's great to introduce new Members to the programme because everyone gets so much out of it.”

Also very popular is the Nutrition Course. This is another useful service that Blesma has recently come to

offer, helping Members to start to think about changing their diets and making healthier life choices. The secret, according to course leader Heather Gomez, is not to try to change too much, too quickly.

“If I told you to run a marathon tomorrow, and you hadn't trained for it, you'd fail,” she explains. “But if we aim to run a marathon in the spring you'd have a much better chance.”

“We try to look at nutrition in the same way. It's about becoming aware of what you are eating and what is in it, and then learning to make gradual changes which you can build into your



Clockwise from above: cream teas with Chess-Marie; virtual reality gaming; Heather Gomez talks nutrition; fun on the golf simulator; and Making Generation R



life permanently. Small changes and better choices work more than crash diets and calorie counting.” The Members attending certainly seem impressed.

Elsewhere, Members are enjoying virtual reality gaming as well as a golf simulator. There is a huge choice of famous international courses to play on the simulator, and it doesn’t take long for the banter to start flying along with the golf balls.

Those wanting something a little more refined, meanwhile, settle down

to a scrumptious cream tea. With a range of sandwiches, scones and cakes on offer, it may not have pleased the leader of the nutrition course! It was certainly a real treat though – especially as it was accompanied by the four-octave singing range of Chess-Marie Mezzo who performed a range of classical, pop and musical theatre favourites.

All in all – and as ever for a Blesma Members’ Weekend – there really was something for everyone.

How to get involved in 2022

Some of these activities, and many more besides, will be on offer throughout next year – all for free! For more on what’s coming up in 2022, and instructions on how to apply, visit www.blesma.org

VOX POPS

What did you make of Members' Weekend?



“My wife is a Member, so we decided to come along and see what the weekend was all about. I’m happy we did, because we met many like-minded people. After isolating for so long it was lovely to come away again and be out.”

TREVOR KNIGHT



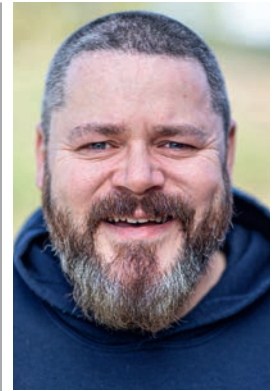
“As an Outreach Officer I’ve had so many Zoom meetings over the last 12 months, so it is wonderful to actually meet so many of my Members in person. My Blesma Book Club have all met up with each other, and to see them chatting away is very satisfying.”

SARAH PAYNE



“As with any Blesma event, it has been really well planned. This was my first Members' Weekend but I’ve been made so welcome by so many friendly faces. This was also the first time I’ve got dressed up for a gala dinner, and I really enjoyed doing that.”

FRANK YATES



“This was my first Members' Weekend and it was brilliant. I did a Blesma trip to Colorado a few years ago and have been able to meet up with a few people from that. I also enjoyed taking part in the nutrition workshop.”

MICHAEL O'BRIEN



“We met on a Widows Week. We live nearby and have become good friends, so to spend some time together is really nice. Although being in a big group again was a bit daunting at first, the weekend has been wonderful.”

MO BIRD AND CAROL SMITH



“We’ve read about Members’ Weekend in the magazine, but to actually be here is wonderful! It’s fantastic that you can have a chat with everyone, right up to the Chairman and Chief Executive.”

DAVID AND MONICA STEPHENSON



“I’ve enjoyed getting back with other Members and seeing people again. For me, Members’ Weekend is a social thing. It’s nice to be back among friends - and I had always fancied trying axe throwing!”

ANDY WEDGE



“I joined as an Outreach Officer before lockdown, so being at an event where things feel like they are getting back to normal is great. There are people inspiring each other here, and I get to see that every day, which is a lovely part of the job.”

EMMA GRATION

MEMBERS' WEEKEND 2021

