

173rd Annual General Meeting

**Minutes of the meeting held in the Reading Room at 6pm on
Wednesday 5 November 2014**

The Chairman, Bill Emmott (presiding), welcomed those present. A total of 88 members signed the attendance book. The Chairman identified three key elements that made the Library what it was – the books, the building and the staff, whom he praised for the continued excellence of their service. This in turn was reflected in the quality of members' own literary output.

Library members writing on political themes had had a particularly good year, winning five of the ten categories in the Paddy Power Political Books of the Year awards, while the PEN/Pinter Prize had been awarded to a Library member for the second year running. Members had also featured prominently on the judging panels for the Samuel Johnson and Man Booker Prizes.

The Library's building project, designed by architects Haworth Tompkins, had won regional and national awards from the RIBA and reached the "midlist" of 15 for the prestigious Stirling Prize, a remarkable achievement for a project that was not yet complete. The prize had ultimately been won by the Liverpool Everyman Theatre, another Haworth Tompkins project.

An Archive on 4 radio programme in January 2014 had featured an interview with Helen O'Neill on "Tommy's Tunes", the book which led to the creation of *The Long Long Trail* documentary telling the story of the First World War through the soldiers' songs. The Library's books had also been glimpsed in various TV documentaries including a BBC series on finding lost masterpieces.

The Chairman made mention of the recent upgrade to the Members' Room and noted that among its uses was for events organised by members, who were welcome to enquire further if interested.

The Treasurer, Mark Storey, then gave a presentation on the Library's finances. The net loss of 138 members recorded during 2013-2014 had been a disappointing result, and the budget for 2014-2015 had assumed no growth in numbers. Current trends in fact showed a slow decline although service enhancements were in hand which should assist retention.

Nevertheless 2013-2014 had shown a small overall surplus on core funds, thanks mainly to legacy income. Being inherently unpredictable, legacies were not budgeted for except at a modest background level, but had been very useful at a time when the fundraising and marketing staff teams were being rebuilt. The Treasurer warmly welcomed the appointment of Philip Spedding to the post of Development Director in May 2014.

Staff costs accounted for around two-thirds of total expenditure and cost control remained strong. Measures to reduce the risks associated with the final salary pension scheme (closed in 2011 but still in deficit) were under review.

Investment returns were relatively modest but also fairly stable. The Library maintained a substantial balance in cash, which currently offered very low returns, as its reserves were not sufficient to justify a major shift into riskier assets. The Development Director would however be seeking to rebuild the endowment and so underpin the finances in the longer term, and the investment policy would be reviewed in this context.

The Chairman invited questions and a member asked why Gift Aid receipts had declined. The Chairman explained that in 2003 HM Revenue & Customs had advised the Library that it could claim Gift Aid on its fee income. In 2010, however, it had revoked this ruling on the grounds that it had been made in error, since membership fees were not donations but payments for services.

Another member asked whether any research had been done into the impact of fee rates on membership recruitment and retention. The Chairman replied that this was monitored but that it was hard to draw firm conclusions. The Trustees were nevertheless mindful of the issue when making their recommendations on fee levels.

The Treasurer added that the introduction of half-price fees for Young Persons and Spouse members offered relevant evidence. There had been some growth in these categories but not enough to justify risking larger-scale reductions, which could only be considered when the endowment had been rebuilt. Meanwhile fees were held as low as prudently possible.

A member asked what proportion of the membership were professionals who treated the fee as a business expense. The Librarian explained that no statistics were available as members were not required to provide this information.

A member asked whether there were plans to grow the membership. The Chairman replied that this was a key element of the strategy identified in Philip Spedding's initial analysis, although progress prior to his arrival had been hampered by the lack of stable leadership. Word of mouth continued to be very important and members' help would be very welcome.

A member noted that the Library had two complete sets of the works of Sigmund Freud, both available for borrowing. He suggested that one set might be kept for reference only and asked what the Library's policy was in this regard. The Librarian was only aware of one example, the works of Walpole, where a second set acquired by donation had been retained for reference. The usual policy was to make as much of the collection as possible available for loan and the Library would not deliberately buy a second set for reference.

Jules Lubbock asked to what extent the Trustees had considered publicising the growth of the e-library. The Chairman believed this could offer useful marketing potential, and it would be taken forward.

A member noted that membership numbers had grown substantially during 2010-2011 and asked what reasons had been adduced for this. The Chairman replied that the "halo effect" from the completion of the Phase 2 building works was thought to be the main factor, along with the end of the disruption which had been something of a barrier. The Librarian added that the completion of the works had generated a good deal of positive press coverage, which contributed much more effectively to membership recruitment

than advertising. A similar effect had been noticed after the 150th anniversary in 1991 and it was hoped that this would be repeated with the 175th anniversary in 2016.

A member asked whether consideration be given to designating spaces for Skype and mobile phone use beyond the Members' Room. The Chairman understood the point but explained that the decision to restrict usage had been driven by mounting complaints by members about other members' behaviour. Further progress could be made only when more space was available, and during the next phase of building works it was hoped to create dedicated "phone booths".

Sandor Vaci reported on a recent exchange of letters between the Librarian and himself regarding a woman who had visited the Library wearing a full-face veil, and he offered to send copies to other members if they were interested. He saw the wearing of the veil as an ideological statement which had made him uncomfortable.

The Chairman replied that the Trustees had discussed the issue and that the visit had not yet resulted in a membership application. If and when it did the application would be treated in the same way as any other, and it would be inappropriate to make a judgement based on the applicant's dress or the putative motivation behind it. The Library's Rules were framed so as to avoid being unduly prescriptive except where other members or the security of the collections were affected. The Library would follow the British Library in striking a balance between the wearer's wish to preserve modesty and the organisation's need to protect its assets and staff. In practice this would mean that the same security requirements – photographs and identity checks – would apply to all members but the necessary photographs and identity checks could be carried out by female staff in a screened-off area when so requested for religious or cultural reasons.

A member expressed his frustration that the use of mobile phones was not permitted in the Issue Hall and felt that members working in the Library had a right to expect such a facility. He pointed out that many other telephone calls already took place there, and believed that if staff were to police the use of mobile phones with slightly more vigour an acceptable accommodation could be found.

The Chairman acknowledged that a number of other members held similar views, and clearly the Library had no wish to put off current or potential members. However, there had been complaints about noise leakage from the Issue Hall to the Lightwell and other areas. Moreover, the policing of mobile phone use was by no means easy for staff who were charged with other duties more central to their role.

The Librarian added that the new rule had been introduced specifically in response to an escalation of complaints by individual members about other individual members. Since both parties believed they were in the right it was impossible for staff to negotiate a compromise or reconciliation. Calls might start quietly but the volume typically rose as the speaker became more engaged, and what was intended to be a quick call could stretch into a long conversation. Planning for the next stage of building works would begin the following day and the brief would include the creation of additional phone-friendly spaces, but in the meantime the current policy was entirely in line with that of other libraries.

A new member encouraged all the published authors within the Library's membership to celebrate the contribution it had made to their work. The Chairman warmly endorsed this and thanked the member for joining. He made mention also of a recent Guardian article by a researcher for the acclaimed new Mike Leigh film on the artist Turner, who delighted in the idiosyncratic material she had found in the Library's collections.

A member noted the Library's wish to build interest among the US audience and asked whether any reciprocal arrangements were in place. The Librarian replied that the Library was open to visits by some comparable US institutions such as the Boston Athenaeum, but full reciprocal arrangements would not be practical due to the disparities in traffic volume. Nevertheless this was an area that would continue to be explored.

A member asked about the Library's policy on photocopying of books, having noticed that members did not always use the book scanner. The Librarian suspected that more policing might be needed in this regard.

The Chairman closed the questions and moved to the formal business of the meeting.

The members approved the minutes of the 172nd Annual General Meeting by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The members approved the adoption of the 2013-2014 Annual Report and Accounts by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The members approved the appointment of Elizabeth Herridge as a Trustee by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The members approved the appointment of David Lough as a Trustee by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The members approved the appointment of Sara Wheeler as a Trustee by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The members approved the reappointment of Moore Stephens LLP as the Library's auditors by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The members approved the 2015 fee proposals by a show of hands, with one dissenting vote. The new fees represented an increase of 2.1% on the current levels.

The members approved the appointment of Sir John Richardson KBE as a Vice-President of the Library by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes. The Chairman explained that Sir John lived in New York and could assist efforts to promote the Library in the USA. He noted that another Vice-President, Kenneth Rose, had sadly died in January 2014.

The Chairman closed the formal business of the meeting and the Librarian introduced Amanda Stebbings, the Library's Head of Member Services, to give a short illustrated talk. This began with a review of recent improvements including the refurbished Members' Room, extended Wi-Fi access, the introduction of LED lighting in the Art Room and not least the new and very popular hat hooks. Meanwhile staff had continued to deal with a diverse range of enquiries from members.

The presentation concluded with an overview of the new "discovery tool" Primo, which offered a whole new way of using the Library's catalogue, accessing a vast range of material from a single search screen. The Library was keen to involve members in the testing phase and volunteers were welcome. Drop-in training sessions would also be provided in due course.

The Chairman explained that the acquisition of the Primo software had been made possible by a generous donation from an anonymous donor, whom he thanked warmly.