

172nd Annual General Meeting

**Minutes of the meeting held in the Reading Room at 6pm on
Tuesday 5 November 2013**

The Chairman, Bill Emmott (presiding), welcomed those present to the recently refurbished Reading Room. He reminded them that this year's AGM would be immediately followed by an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) to deal with proposed changes to the Library's Byelaws.

The Chairman was pleased to report that the Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction had just been won by a Library member, Lucy Hughes-Hallett, for her new book on Gabriele d'Annunzio entitled *The Pike*. He felt that Mazzini, one of the founders of the Library's Italian collection, would have been proud. He noted also that seven Library members had been on the long list for the prize of whom three had made it to the shortlist. Meanwhile the Library's President, Sir Tom Stoppard, had shared the PEN Pinter Prize with a courageous Belorussian writer, and three Library members had been nominated among the Best Young Writers under 40.

The last year at the Library had been as busy as ever. Phase 3A of the Development Project had recently been completed with the reopening of the Reading Room and Writers' Room, and although some dissenting voices had been heard the response had been overwhelmingly positive. Members naturally tended to remember the Reading Room as it had been immediately before the recent works, but it was important to be aware that it had seen a number of previous changes during its long history.

Some 80,000 books had been loaned during the year and 9,000 new books added to the catalogue. Significant new electronic resources included the *OED Online* and the *Oxford History of Western Music*, as well as the intriguingly titled *The Electronic Enlightenment*.

A new Strategic Plan had been introduced and was available on the Library's website, setting out the Library's guiding principles and priorities for the next five years. The Library had also undertaken the first major governance review since the current Royal Charter was issued in 2004. The proposed Byelaw changes would be dealt with at the EGM and the executive team was now working on a re-draft of the Rules, with an emphasis on matters of conduct and etiquette. It was hoped that these would be issued in the New Year.

The Library's opening hours were a matter of particular interest to members. After taking note of comments received and data obtained from the new proximity cards, the Trustees had agreed that from 6 January 2014 the Library would open till 8pm from Mondays to Wednesdays. The Chairman explained that the change required an adjustment of staff rotas, and to extend opening hours any further without compromising service standards would be unaffordable with the Library's current resources.

The Treasurer gave a short presentation on the Library's finances, including a review of the last five years and current budgets. Membership numbers had levelled off and showed some net attrition though not enough to cause serious concern, and there was now a larger proportion than previously of subsidised members within the overall mix. The loss of Gift Aid on fee income from October 2010 had spurred the creation of the Founders' Circle which had since achieved good results, despite reduced momentum in the last year as a result of staffing disruption in the Development Office. Full funding had also been secured for Phase 3A of the Building Project, and the Library had benefitted from a number of substantial legacies. As a general principle such income would be applied to special projects and initiatives, but the Trustees had agreed to allocate some £200,000 to the core budget while the fundraising staff team was rebuilt. An interim director was now in place and recruitment of a permanent replacement was in hand, while a new post had been created for Helen O'Neill to develop the rich material within the archives and provide the Development Office with curatorial support.

The Library's investments continued to deliver reliable returns from a cautious portfolio with a substantial allocation to cash and fixed interest holdings. Unfortunately, the reported pension fund deficit had increased as a result of adverse market movements, but the adverse impact derived from exceptionally low interest rates (used to discount the future actuarial liabilities) rather than the performance of the fund's investment assets, and there were signs of an improvement in the new financial year. In conclusion, the Treasurer declared himself confident that the Library was ready to meet the numerous challenges facing it.

The Chairman invited questions from the floor. Richard Haslam asked what plans the Library now had for venue hire in the light of the impending change to opening hours. The Chairman did not wish to pre-judge an issue that would be for the Development Director to consider in detail, but noted that venue hire was now offered to Founders' Circle members and occasionally to others on a discretionary basis. The Librarian added that venue hire had been an experimental initiative from the start and the approach had evolved in the light of experience. It had first been marketed as a stand-alone option and then offered as an exclusive benefit to potential high value corporate sponsors, but this approach had proved unsuccessful. It was now operating on a relatively small scale and was seen mainly as a means of encouraging new entrants to the Founders' Circle. It was hoped that Thursdays would prove attractive to potential hirers.

Alan Saunders asked whether the Library had considered offering discounts to members living in the provinces. The Librarian replied that it had been discussed before but not taken forward. She explained that many members who lived in the provinces had jobs in London, and even remote users often made heavy use of the Library. Moreover, the Library had to be staffed for maximum foreseeable demand and the high fixed costs associated with this made a usage-based fee structure unworkable.

Peter Rutzer asked if the new Strategic Plan included any major changes. The Librarian explained that the document had been compiled over the course of a year and did not attempt to set out targets and milestones in detail. Rather it was structured around five key objectives focussed on the collections, access, research and reading, cultivating a literary and intellectual community and sharing the Library's heritage. The last of these was the focus of Helen O'Neill's new post.

Another member referred to comments made earlier in the meeting and in the Annual Report about the staffing crisis in the Development Office, and asked for clarification. The Chairman explained that Lottie Cole had resigned as Development Director in August 2012 to take up a new job at RIBA which she could not easily refuse. During her eight

years at the Library she had led the capital fundraising campaign and subsequently taken on an expanding range of additional responsibilities, building a staff team in the process. The "crisis" occurred after her replacement was appointed and proved unsuitable for the post. Although the contract was terminated after three months, team morale had by then been damaged and a number of staff chose to leave. The episode had not been a happy one but neither was it untypical in the fundraising world. Stability had since been restored under the guidance of an interim Director, while recruitment of a permanent replacement was in hand.

Andrew Duff had been reading about the early history of the Library and noted that Thomas Carlyle's aim had been to ensure that it was open for longer than the British Library. He asked whether the present proposals for opening hours were shaped more by fundraising requirements or by members' interests. The Chairman made it clear that fundraising was not a key driver. The Librarian added that in Carlyle's time there had been no Reading Room and the Library's books were for borrowing only. In the 1970s the Library had started opening for one evening per week until 7.30pm. In the 1990s this had increased to three evenings per week and in 2009 the hours had been changed to allow opening till 9pm on two nights per week. This had been done partly to facilitate fundraising events and partly in response to members' suggestions. A recent review of statistics showed that on average only two members per day arrived at the Library after 8pm, while those leaving after 8pm accounted for just 6% of the daily totals. Indeed, the number of members arriving after 5.30pm was relatively low and the main impact of an extension of hours was that members already in the Library stayed a little longer. Most, however, left by around 8pm and this was the basis for the current proposal. If more funding were available then a debate could be held as to how it could best be allocated, but it was important to realise that just 3 years ago the Library had been charged with cutting annual running costs by some £300,000.

Another member welcomed the return to evening opening on three nights per week, but asked whether there was scope for members' discussion meetings featuring interesting but unpaid speakers. The Librarian replied that the Library's limited staff budgets would preclude it from organising such events, but there was nothing to stop members using the Members' Room for the purpose.

Michael Bond was also pleased that the opening hours were changing, but felt members would like to be able to communicate more easily with the Library's management. The Chairman commented that the decision on opening hours had been driven initially by communications from members (not least at the 2012 AGM) and informed further by detailed statistics. He welcomed communications from members but noted that the most vocal were not necessarily the most typical. The Librarian apologised that the burdens of work and life sometimes prevented her from replying to communications as promptly as she would like but reported that a wide range of member opinions did reach her through existing channels. It was, however, no simple task to balance views that were often in direct opposition.

The final question concerned the fluorescent lights in the Reading Room, which might seem out of keeping with the space. The Librarian commented that the lights beneath the galleries were needed to illuminate the books on the lower shelves, but agreed that the lights by the fireplace might need some adjustment to reduce glare.

The Chairman moved to the formal business of the meeting.

The members approved the minutes of the 171st Annual General Meeting held on 6 November 2012 by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The members approved the adoption of the 2012-2013 Annual Report and Financial Statements by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The members approved the appointment of Anthony McGrath and Sophie Murray as Trustees by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes. The Chairman noted that a third candidate had been put forward but had subsequently had to withdraw. He gave thanks to the four Trustees retiring at the present AGM.

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 2014 fee proposals by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes. The new fees represented an increase of 3.3% on the current levels.

The Chairman closed the AGM before formally convening an EGM to consider the proposed Byelaw changes.

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Extraordinary General Meeting

The Chairman opened the EGM by explaining that the primary reason for the proposed Byelaw changes was a perceived lack of continuity in the Trustee body, which reduced its effectiveness and created additional administrative work for the Librarian and her team. A lengthening of the Trustees' terms of office was the key recommendation to emerge from a governance review by Sir Nicholas Underhill. This in turn required a change in the Byelaws, so the Trustees had established a special committee to re-draft the Byelaws accordingly. The new draft had already received the informal approval of the Privy Council, whose final approval would be subject to that of the members at the present EGM.

The members approved the resolution setting out the proposed amendments to the Byelaws by a show of hands, with no dissenting votes.

The Chairman noted that the Library's management team were now working on revisions to the Rules with a view to these being published in the New Year. He thanked members for attending and closed the EGM.

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After the completion of the formal business, Helen O'Neill gave a presentation entitled *Steaming into the Future: The Library's Victorian Past*. She considered it a privilege to have served the Library's membership in her previous role as Head of Reader Services, and now wanted to use the archives to develop services further. Her talk drew on a variety of nuggets from the archives, featuring such illustrious former members as William and Jane Morris, Henry Irving and John Stuart Mill. She closed with a quote from EM Forster delivered in the aftermath of bomb damage to the Library during the Second World War. In contrast to those who characterised the Library as a typically British institution, Forster saw it rather as an oasis of civilisation which could help its users become better human beings. The synergy between the Library's collection and its members continued to be the source of its special qualities to this day.