

Society of Genealogists

Annual General Meeting 2024 Minutes

Minutes of the 113th Annual General Meeting of the Society of Genealogists was held on Tuesday, 23rd July 2024 at 6pm. There were 78 people recorded as having attended online, and 30 people attended in-person.

The meeting was presided over by Patric Dickinson, LVO, MA, FSG, President of the Society.

The Chairman reported that the Trustees minutes of the 112th Annual General Meeting were approved by the Board of Trustees at their meeting in August 2023 and was published on the Society's website.

1. THE AUDITOR'S REPORT

The Chairman invited members to note the Auditor's Report contained in the Annual Report 2023, which had been published on the Society's website. He highlighted that the Auditors were satisfied the Society's Accounts gave a true and fair view of the financial position. He took the Auditor's Report as read.

No comments were made and the meeting was happy for the Auditor's Report to be taken as read.

2. THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

The Chairman invited Mr Graham Walter, Chair of the Board of Trustees, to speak on the Annual Report.

Mr Walter welcomed the arrival of Philip Spedding as CEO and thanked Rebecca Gregory and Natalie Pithers for their work as Interim CEOs.

2023 had been a pivotal year for the Society as the charity successfully completed the move to the new premises at Wharf Road. The relocation marks a significant milestone in the Society's journey to better serve the membership and wider genealogical community.

The centrepiece of the new premises is the Research Hub which houses the library archive and computer facilities, designed to inspire and facilitate genealogical research. The retrieval system that was begun at Holloway Road continues to be used, ensuring that all collections can be accessed.

Mr Walter expressed his gratitude to all staff, volunteers and members for their unwavering support throughout the year.

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3. THE ANNUAL ACCOUNTS 2020

Mr Ray O'Connell, Treasurer, presented the Annual Accounts for the year 2023, full details of which were in the published figures on page 14. Mr O'Connell highlighted a few points:

- The Society's income was just over £800,000, with an operating deficit of £360,000.
- Mr O'Connell highlighted that 2021 and 2022 were exceptional years for income due to very significant legacies. 2023 returned to a more normal pattern of income and expenditure.
- The other main financial element of 2023 was the fit-out of the Wharf Road premises. The work was completed under budget and in time for the December opening.

Some budgets have been carried through to 2024 for snagging and finishing, but these amounts are minor.

- The Society continues to invest funds safely in interest-bearing cash funds. This earned the Society over £65,000 in 2023, up from £11,000 in 2022.
- In Mr O'Connell's opinion, the Society's strong financial resources underpins its ongoing investment in member services but the Board is mindful of the need to operate on a break even position in the future.

Question: A member from the floor asked about the ongoing leasehold and management charges of the new premises.

Mr Ray O'Connell responded that the costs of both charges are minimal so the Society effectively has full operational control. Maintenance costs are paid directly, and no major works are foreseen in the short term. The normal costs of running the building are provided for in the budget.

Question: A member from the floor asked why there have been a number of interim CEOs in a short period of time.

Mr Spedding and Mr Walter responded that Mr Patrick Barker had been employed on a fixed short-term contract to oversee the opening of the new premises, and he left as planned after a small extension to his contract. Ms Natalie Pithers and Ms Rebecca Gregory served as interim CEOs until the Board appointed Mr Spedding as permanent CEO after a full recruitment process.

Question: A member from the floor asked why the Society has moved from Charterhouse Buildings to its new Research Hub at 40 Wharf Road.

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Mr Walter replied that Charterhouse Buildings was requiring a large amount of maintenance so the decision was made to put the building up for sale and buy a new, smaller, and more modern site in Central London.

Question: A member from the floor asked for the Society to consider looking into the option of being able to Gift Aid membership fees, such as done by the National Trust.

Mr Spedding replied that the National Trust is able to claim Gift Aid due to an exception in the Gift Aid rules that allows it to be claimed on payments to see a charity's conservation work. For most charities, including the Society, where membership grants access to useful facilities, Gift Aid cannot be claimed.

Question: A member asked a question about expenditure, including library and genealogy expenditure.

Mr O'Connell replied that the expenditure shown in the accounts outlines the allocation of general expenditure of the Society. He explained that in the case of the cost of off-site storage it is difficult to give a steady-state figure as there have been different phases of removal of material throughout the year. This figure will continue to approach stability as the Society implements new strategies regarding storage.

Question: A member of the audience on Zoom asked a question regarding the deficit in the budget.

Mr O'Connell confirmed that operating deficits have been a part of the Society's accounts for the last four years but these had been obscured by extraordinarily large legacies in 2021 and 22 and the sale of Charterhouse. The process to address the deficit is a multi-year one, aided by the stability that being settled in the new premises at Wharf Road provides, and by the strong financial resources of the Society.

Question: A member from the floor asked if there was a sense of the impact of Gold Membership on event income in the first 6 months of 2024.

Mr O'Connell replied that he could not give a full picture as the accounts for 2024 have not yet been compiled, however the impact of Gold on Events income has been considered and the Board is confident that the budget will still be delivered.

Question: A member of the audience on Zoom asked if the Society could be clear and honest about how to reduce the deficit, with an emphasis on the costs of off-site storage.

Mr O'Connell reiterated that the cost of storage is being brought down now that the Society is stable in its new premises, and this will continue to be optimised over the course of the next year. The deficit is made up of more than simply the costs of storage, and will be addressed strategically by the Board over the course of 2024.

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Question: A member of the audience on Zoom asked what is the value of the Society's reserves.

Mr O'Connell replied that the bulk of the reserves is made up of c.£2 million in investments, made up of the profit of the sale of Charterhouse Buildings and the legacies made to the Society over the past two years. These reserves are split between two high-interest bearing funds. Mr O'Connell noted that some of the legacies are restricted.

Question: A member of the audience on Zoom asked if the Board is concerned by the costs of storage over a long period of time.

Mr O'Connell replied that the Society has enough financial resources to ensure strategic flexibility to address how storage costs are managed, and reiterated that storage costs will be optimised over time. He emphasised that the Society holds paramount that member services are not affected in the short term, and that the strong financial position of the Society will allow for this.

Finally, during this section of the meeting a member from the floor brought up a matter concerning their communication with the society in 2021 and 2022. The decision was taken for Mr Walter to investigate the matter further and discuss it with the member after the meeting.

There being no further questions, the Chairman stated that voting to approve the Annual Report and Annual Accounts would be reported separately for the two items.

Resolution to receive the Annual Report of the Board of Trustees was moved and seconded. All in favour 55; all against 0; abstentions 1. The motion was carried.

Resolution to receive the Annual Accounts to 31 December 2023 was moved and seconded. All in favour 55; all against 0; abstentions 1. The motion was carried.

4. THE APPOINTMENT OF THE AUDITORS

In accordance with Section 485 of the Companies Act 2006, the appointment of Richard Place Dobson as Auditors was put to the Meeting, and was proposed and seconded by a Member from the body of the meeting.

There being no questions concerning the appointment of the auditors, the Chairman asked if a member would like to move the appointment of Richard Place Dobson as auditors of the Society.

Resolution to appoint the auditors: Richard Place Dobson as auditors of the Society was moved and seconded. All in favour 56; all against 0; abstentions 1. The motion was carried.

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5. CEO'S REPORT AND UPDATE

The Chairman introduced the Chief Executive, Mr Philip Spedding, who gave a short update.

Despite only being CEO of the Society for 4 weeks, Mr Spedding said that it was clear that the outstanding achievement of 2023 had been the completion of the fit-out and opening of the new home of the Society at 40 Wharf Road. He applauded all those who had been involved, from the Trustees and volunteers, to all the staff, for what he considered to be a singular success.

Mr Spedding took the opportunity to thank in particular his predecessors, Patrick Barker, and Natalie Pithers and Rebecca Gregory for maintaining and developing the work of the Society across a period of significant change.

He highlighted:

- The launch of SoG Explore, which provides a far more effective gateway into the Society's extensive digital folders. In 2023, 2 million names were added to Explore.
- The launch of TreeSearch, the innovative portal which will allow members to explore the Society's unique holdings of family trees, pedigree rolls, birth briefs, and associated handwritten notes. He thanked in particular the work of Alan Purcell and the volunteers who have masterminded the task.
- The Society's ongoing presence at Family History events including shows at York and Kempton Park, at the British Library, International Jewish Genealogical Conference, and at Roots Tech Conference in Salt Lake City, where representatives of the Society both spoke and ran a stall. The Society was featured in the Family Tree Magazine 2023 handbook, and the Who Do You Think You Are magazine.
- The events program has continued to evolve in 2023 and now provides a comprehensive library of talks to help members and non-members in their genealogical research.
- The Society partnered with the British Association of Local History, the Society of One Name Studies, and the Genealogy Stories, to host the online event All About That Place, which published 130 short online presentations which were broadcast across Facebook and YouTube. The Society is grateful to all speakers who took part, and is pleased to report that the event will run again from the 27th September to the 6th October, 2024.
- Membership remains a central challenge having fallen by 3% in 2023. Although this is a trend experienced by many similar organisations, the Society intends to focus on the challenge of increasing member numbers and retention in 2024 and beyond.

Mr Spedding paid tribute to the support received from the estates of John Brian Rogers, Robert John Turner, and John Michael Rudd. He encouraged any members who would like to support the Society by a legacy or donation in their will, to speak to him.

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Mr Spedding emphasised the Society's advocacy role, ensuring that the interests of the community are well represented.

Mr Spedding finished by emphasising the importance of genealogy, and in particular the community aspect which forms the heart of the Society.

6. THE APPOINTMENT OF TRUSTEES OF THE SOCIETY

The Chairman moved to the next item of business which was to elect new members to the Board of Trustees. Before doing so, thanks and appreciation was given to Sophie Hutchinson and Sheila Mercieca who have stepped down from their roles as Trustees.

The Chairman reminded the meeting that Trustees were to be elected for terms of three years, with a maximum of six years of service. After six years of service, Trustees were required to stand down, unless in exceptional circumstances.

The Articles of the Society currently provided for a maximum of ten members of the Board of Trustees. The resignations of Sophie Hutchinson and Sheila Mercieca leave three vacancies. Two Trustees are also standing for re-election: David Gill and Daris Williams. Finally Judy Webb had been co-opted onto the Board earlier in 2024. The Articles allow that if the number of those nominated or standing for re-election are fewer than the number of vacancies, those offering themselves can be appointed to the Board of Trustees without a formal election. After the appointment of three proposed Trustees, the Society would be below the maximum number of Board members, therefore the nominees were automatically elected.

Short biographies of the candidates were included within the proxy voting forms circulated in advance of the AGM.

7. TO ANNOUNCE AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIP OF THE SOCIETY

The chairman invited the newly elected Vice Chairman of the Fellows, Paul Blake, to present members with the honour of Fellowship to the Society. Mr Blake announced the awarding of a Fellowship of the Society to Diana Swinfield.

The Chief Executive, Mr Philip Spedding was invited to award certificates of appreciation to:

- Penny Mann: for excellent service as an indexer for SoG Data Online indexing projects
- Susan Deacon: for excellent service as an indexer for the Great Card Index project
- Sian Ruiz: for excellence in library counter service
- Sherryl Abrahart: for excellent service as Book Reviews Coordinator
- Katriina Baxandall: for excellent service as a library volunteer

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- Mike Cooper: for excellent service to digitisation projects and the Pedigree Rolls project
- Jo McKinnon: for excellent service to the Pedigree Rolls project
- Ann Johnson: for excellent service to the Pedigree Rolls project
- Gwyneth Wilkie: For all her service to the Events Team and other areas of SoG over many years.

Those named who were not present at the meeting would have their certificates sent to them via post.

Mr Spedding expressed his gratitude to all those who volunteer their time at the Society. He encouraged anyone who is interested in volunteering to contact the Volunteer Coordinator.

8. OTHER COMPETENT BUSINESS

The Chairman invited members to ask questions about any aspect of the reports or any other relevant matters.

Question: A member from the floor asked the Trustees to consider a late-night opening, and more Saturday openings during the month. He also asked them to consider merchandise options, as had been sold in the past.

Mr Ray O'Connell commented that opening hours have been considered and that staff have been flexible in terms of additional opening, which is being refined. He noted that the opening hours needed to reflect demand, but that this is being regularly reviewed. The suggestion of merchandise will form part of the strategic review process.

Question: A member of the floor asked why the deceased list that was featured in the June edition of the Genealogists' Magazine did not include middle names.

Mr Spedding replied that this was an administrative error, and would be corrected in the following edition of the Magazine.

Question: A member of the floor asked for updates on the digitisation of the Family History Documents, and the sorting of the collection of films from the Latter-day Saints (LDS).

Ms Christine Worthington in her role as Research Collections Coordinator replied that c.400 of the 750 boxes of LDS microfilms have been sorted, and the project will resume from August. Of the c.400 boxes that have been processed, 60 boxes of material were found not to be replicating information available through an affiliate family search account.

There are c.10 loads of 20 boxes of Family History Documents left to process, the project should be finished by the end of the year.

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Question: A member of the floor asked if the Society would consider pursuing engagement with American and Canadian Family History Societies, via talks and resources.

Mr Spedding confirmed that the Society intends to do so.

Question: A member of the audience on Zoom asked about the process of ordering items prior to a library visit, commenting that in his view offsite storage makes visitor experience more difficult.

Mr Spedding replied that the pre-ordering of items is naturally a challenge but one that is faced by many other archives in London. This was an inherent part of the decision to store materials off-site rather than buy a bigger and more expensive building in Central London.

Question: A member of the audience on Zoom asked for an update on member numbers.

Mr Spedding replied that membership numbers are slowly declining but that Gold has exceeded its financial target for the year.

Question: A member of the audience on Zoom noted that wages have increased by 22% and pensions by 34%.

Mr Ray O'Connell replied that there were some overlaps between staff, notably the CEO in 2023 which meant there was an exceptional increase in certain aspects. He noted more generally that staff costs are a large component of expenditure, but that they are a valuable part of the offering so must be looked at in a constructive way.

Question: A member of the audience on Zoom commented that once opening hours are set, they need to be retained, unchanged, long enough to ensure that they become sufficiently well known to generate footfall.

Mr Spedding replied that the Society has responded to a membership demand to open on Saturdays, but notes that the low visitor numbers so far suggest that footfall is insufficient to sustain current Saturday opening hours, let alone merit any increase in them. However, the questioner's point is well made and opening hours will be kept under review to see if this changes.

Question: A member of the audience on Zoom asked for an update on the visitor numbers at Wharf Road compared to Charterhouse Buildings.

Mr Spedding replied that this data is not available, however there needs to be a recognition that the world has changed significantly since the Society was at Charterhouse Buildings, which has altered how people work and access information. This would clearly have an impact on the number of people attending a physical library.

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Dr Colin Chapman commented that all family history societies and federations are experiencing the same issue of physical attendance.

The Chair declared the formal part of 2024 Annual General Meeting to be closed.