

Society of Genealogists

Annual General Meeting 2025 Minutes

Minutes of the 114th Annual General Meeting of the Society of Genealogists was held on Tuesday, 22nd July 2025 at 6pm. There were 70 people recorded as having attended online, and 45 people attended in-person.

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

The Chairman reported that the Minutes of the 113th Annual General Meeting were approved by the Board of Trustees in October 2025 and were published on the Society's website.

1. THE AUDITOR'S REPORT

The Chairman asked members to note the Auditor's Report contained in the Annual Report 2024, which had been published on the Society's website. He highlighted that on pages 11 to 13 the Auditors gave an opinion that the Society's Accounts gave a true and fair view of the financial position. He asked the room for any comments. As there were none, he took the Report 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, to be followed by Mr Ray O'Connell, the Treasurer.

Mr Walter explained that it was with mixed emotions that he addressed the membership as this was his last appearance as Chair as his two terms as a trustee had come to an end. He expressed his pride in what had been achieved by everyone at the Society during his tenure, particularly over the last few years.

He noted that 2024 was the first full year in which the Society had occupied its new home at Wharf Road. He believed that it had proved a success and that those who had worked in the Research Hub have found the space conducive to research and study, as well as conversation and discussion.

He expressed his deepest gratitude to all those who volunteer for the Society and noted their pivotal role in enabling it to fulfil its founding principle of helping people to discover their place in history. From preserving records and helping members of the public to working tirelessly on various projects and helping to present the Society's events, he acknowledged the dedication, hard work and commitment from all and expressed the Society's profound appreciation.

Society of Genealogists

He also expressed a recognition of, and sincere thanks for, the hard work, professionalism and commitment of the staff towards the essential smooth operations of the Society.

Finally, he thanked his fellow trustees for their dedicated service and leadership, as well as their support for him as Chair. He noted the unique expertise that each member brought to the task and expressed that the Society was fortunate to have such a Board. He found it an honour and privilege to serve amongst them.

3. THE ANNUAL ACCOUNTS 2024

Mr Ray O'Connell, Treasurer, presented the Annual Accounts for the year 2024, full details of which were from page 14 onwards in the Annual Report. Mr O'Connell highlighted a few points:

- The Society's income was just over £800,000, with an operating deficit of £300,000. He noted this was a positive step as it was a reduction of £50,000 from the previous year's deficit.
- Mr O'Connell noted that this was the first full year in the Society's fantastic new building, which had ably demonstrated what a multifaceted space it was.
- In the ongoing work to resolve the challenge of the structural deficit, a strategic review had been conducted in 2024 with the aim of reaching a breakeven position in the next 5 years.
- Overall he felt it was a very positive story, as the Society's position is underpinned by strong financial reserves. This enables continuing investment in member services in areas such as the new CRM system. In addition, the investment of our cash reserves in safe, liquid funds produced a strong return of £140,000 in 2024. This income stream is likely to reduce in 2025 due to ongoing reductions in UK interest rates.
- Having said which, there are clearly potential challenges ahead and the team continues to focus on bolstering the Society's operating income.

Question: A member online asked about how events expenditure had gone from £80,000 in 2023 to £169,000 in 2024.

Mr O'Connell explained that, although events income exceeds direct costs, a large portion of this 'total costs' figure is the apportionment of the shared costs of the building and other general costs. The fact that total costs exceed income makes sense as the Society has a large total deficit. The Questioner enquired whether that is also the reason behind the rise in bookshop costs and Mr O'Connell confirmed that it was. As the operation settles down in the new building, we will continue to examine how to apportion these shared costs on a more representative basis.

Society of Genealogists

Question: A member from the floor asked what proportion of the Gold Membership income went towards education costs, given that Gold Members had free access to many lectures.

Mr O'Connell replied that income was determined according to income type (membership, event etc) and was not apportioned by or to specific activity.

Question: A member from the floor enquired about the strategy for reducing the deficit and asked for some general points about that over the next few years.

Mr O'Connell replied that a discussion on this had happened last year and from that developed a renewed focus on increasing membership, improving events and developing a stronger engagement with the community. The Society also wanted to make better use of Wharf Road. From such a growth strategy should come increased membership and events income. Alongside this, legacies have and will continue to play a very important role.

Question: A member from the floor enquired what 'CRM system' means in terms of membership. They went on to ask about the relationship between the CRM and declining membership numbers and what impact the opening of the new building had had on membership numbers.

Mr Spedding, the CEO, replied that CRM stands for "Customer Relationship Management". The new system that the Society is acquiring will enable it to better communicate offerings of interest to members and also develop those offerings in line with a stronger understanding of members' interests. That understanding, enabled by the CRM, will also inform the marketing that the Society undertakes with a view to achieving the goal of encouraging increased membership uptake.

Mr Spedding went on to explain that the new building had not had an identifiable impact on membership numbers. He noted that the membership could sub-divided into those who actively engaged with the Society, whether Gold and Standard members, and those that did not. This latter group were more likely to be longstanding members and comprised an important and large segment of the membership. Using the new CRM, the Society has been able to better record the reasons people are leaving membership; since introducing the CRM, the second highest reason recorded for people leaving is because they have died.

He added that the current use of Wharf Road does underline that there has been a more fundamental shift in society, since the days of Charterhouse, affecting the way people are approaching in-person activity. The Society is not alone in seeing a decline in this and are looking into ways to address it.

Question: A member from the floor enquired what the Society was doing in terms of attracting younger members.

Society of Genealogists

Mr Spedding replied that this was clearly an important area for the Society in terms of developing a relationship with a demographic who could go on to have a very long-term association with the Society. He noted that younger members are more likely to view any potential membership from a very transactional perspective, asking themselves whether they will get enough out of the membership to merit the financial outlay. The Society therefore needs to better understand what types of benefits such people are looking for when they are considering membership and ensure that we are properly explaining the added value we are able to bring.

Question: A member from the floor explained that they had been a member since the 1980s but are not interested in Gold Membership. They wondered about the value of remaining a member. In particular they had been led to believe that much would be put online but, from their perspective, that has yet to happen.

Mr Spedding responded that placing items online through our bespoke search engine was more complex than it might seem, particularly the need to properly index items so that they are searchable. He encouraged anyone who wanted to understand the process better to talk to Christine Worthington, the Research Collections Coordinator. He went on to say that a number of significant collections held by the Society have been scanned, which is an important first step, and we are now identifying a priority list for those to be processed and placed online.

Question: On Zoom, a member asked how many members join as Gold Members?

Mr Spedding explained that that figure was not to hand but it would be made available.
(Subsequent to the AGM, we have now determined that since the introduction of the new CRM in July, 48 people have joined as Gold Annual Members and 73 as Gold Monthly. Together this represents 65% of the total new members over this period)

Question: On Zoom, a member asked whether it was possible to attend all events, including those that are focused on a particular geographical area.

Mr Spedding recognised the value of being able to attend any event of interest and explained that no geographical blocks to attendance currently exist or are being contemplated.

Question: On Zoom, a member asked whether being a Gold membership somehow denoted how serious a member was in their studies? They went on to ask whether it was possible to offer a reduction on the £10 cost of attending events

Mr Spedding explained that Gold Membership should in no way be seen as a marker of the strength of any member's interests or abilities in this field. It is merely there to provide a useful form of discount for those attending a number of events each month. He went on to

Society of Genealogists

explain that, regrettably, the Society faces costs every time it presents an event. As the Annual Accounts illustrate, the Society is currently running at a loss so, with regret, it does need to charge for events where it has to. Some events are, of course, free.

Question: A member from the floor asked if the Society would consider a cheaper Young Person's membership

Mr Spedding replied that the new CRM will allow the Society much greater flexibility in how much it charges for membership, including the introduction of suitable discounts, and that providing such an introductory discount to Young Members could well make sense.

Question: Three members online asked further questions about membership. One enquired how many members upgraded to Gold. Another asked about the retention of members who had been in membership for a year or more. The third asked what percentage of the membership were Gold members.

Mr Spedding again explained that those figures were not immediately to hand but would be distributed. He understood that about 10% of the membership are currently Gold Members. *(Subsequent to the meeting, further research has shown that since July 85% of members renewed and 14% of members are currently Gold members. To determine the upgrading rate requires a tool within the CRM that will be installed over the next few months)*

Question/Comment: A member on Zoom stated that he felt that the Events team curated an excellent and varied programme and he wanted to congratulate them for that.

Question/Comment: A member in the room noted two typographical errors in the Annual Report *(these were both corrected before the Annual Report was signed and formally placed on the website)*.

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 65; all against 0; abstentions 0. The motion was carried.

Resolution to receive the Annual Accounts to 31 December 2023 was moved and seconded. All in favour 62; all against 0; abstentions 2. 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 Members from the body of the meeting.

Society of Genealogists

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 62; all against 0; abstentions 2. The motion was carried.

5. CEO'S REPORT AND UPDATE

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

Mr Spedding noted that this AGM marked the end of his first year as CEO. He explained that over that time he was delighted to have discovered the Society full of both excellence and potential and that he felt the members, staff and trustees all shared an equal passion for its mission.

He explained that through discussion with members and others, he now feels that the work of the Society falls into three equally important areas.

The first of these focuses on the provision of genealogical information using what is, perhaps, the most important single collection of non-digital genealogical material to be found in the country. The core challenge was how to improve access to it.

He noted how this collection had developed over 100 years through generous donations but needed careful care to ensure it would remain a source of inspiration for genealogists, now and in the future. To support that work, the Society is going to launch a Collection Fund, a restricted fund that can help meet the costs of all aspects of the collection's care and development. He hoped members would consider supporting that fund through gifts or legacies.

How the Society uses the collection to the best advantage was ongoing work. He noted, for example, that visitor numbers on Saturdays had been particularly low and so moving forward the Society was going to open on only one Saturday a month, but balance that with a new late opening once a month. This change would be trialled to see what impact it had.

The second key area of activity are Events. The Society runs a wide range of very well regarded talks and courses. Work needs to be done on encouraging higher take up of in person talks and we also want to develop more self-placed learning courses. He noted that the new CRM will play an important role in helping the Society to manage its events and thanked the membership for their patience as it was being embedded.

The third and final area of work concerns its engagement with the community, both that of genealogists and of the wider society. How that is best strengthened within a digital world

Society of Genealogists

remains a work in progress but we have received feedback from those joining that being part of a community is important to them and the Society needs to develop that.

Looking to the future, he noted that the development of AI is clearly having a fundamental impact on how genealogical services are developed and delivered.

Whilst the Society needs to explore that and other developments in the field, it should not lose sight of the fact that the Society is a place where people can come together, physically or digitally, to share, learn and explore. By strengthening that sense of community and endeavour, we will be underlining why we are a Society.

Question: A member in the room asked what the Society now offered for those less able to come to Wharf Road and might find visiting a local family history centre more amenable.

Ms Churchill, the Society's Genealogist, responded that the collection held unique manuscripts, material that is locally focused, including parish registers, monumental inscriptions and local histories, and over 100 years of donated research, family papers and records. Together they comprise a unique resource.

Question: A member from the floor asked whether any thought had been given to how the Society could better galvanise the knowledge and experience within the membership to help others.

Mr Spedding responded that that was a very important point, in terms of the development of community previously mentioned, and that the Society would be looking into practical ways of taking this forward.

Mr Spedding also offered an open invitation for anyone with any ideas or thoughts on this, or other developments, to contact either him or another member of staff to discuss things further

Question: A member from the floor encouraged the Society to look into claiming Gift Aid on membership fees. He also suggested looking into grants for AI development

Mr Spedding explained that he would do that but that he was concerned that the level of benefits received by members would exceed that allowed within Gift Aid. He also promised to look into the available of AI grants.

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.

Society of Genealogists

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. Given that there are currently eight, the retirement of Graham Walter at this AGM leaves three vacancies to be filled. Following a recruitment process three potential trustees were identified; Kevin Laurence, Ann Radmore and John Wray. Short biographies of each were included in the papers for the AGM.

The Articles allow that if the number of those nominated or standing for re-election are fewer than or equal to the number of vacancies, those offering themselves can be appointed to the Board of Trustees without a formal election. With the appointment of three proposed Trustees, the Society's Board of Trustees would still be within the allowed limit of 10 trustees, therefore the nominees were automatically elected.

The new trustees briefly identified themselves to the room.

Question: A member on Zoom asked whether in future those joining the AGM digitally might be able to vote at the meeting rather than having to use a proxy.

The Chairman responded that it should be possible but it was important to note that any system used would need to be authorised by the Charity Commission. Mr Spedding promised to look into it.

7. TO ANNOUNCE AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIP OF THE SOCIETY

The chairman noted, with sadness, that since the last meeting, the Chair of the Fellows, Neville Taylor, had died. Mr Taylor had joined the Society in 1985 and had remained a hugely important part of it though his work as a kind and diligent volunteer. He would be much missed.

The Chairman then invited Mr Paul Blake, the new Chair of the Fellows, to speak.

Mr Blake noted that the Fellowship had been, of late, deleterious in electing new fellows, with only five being appointed over the last 10 years. Over that period, 27 people had left the fellowship, going to "that great archive in the sky". To address this decline in numbers, the fellows had, in the last few months, decided to elect five new Fellows:

- Angela Buckley
- Debbie Kennett
- Peter O'Donoghue
- Graham Walter
- Daris Williams

Society of Genealogists

(although the others had been pre-alerted, Mr Walter was only told at the meeting, in part as a public mark of thanks for his work as he stood down as Chair of the Society)

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

- Tony Harding: for commitment to quality and productivity as a proofreader for SoG online indexing projects.
- Hilary Holt: for excellent service as a proofreader and indexer for the Great Card Index project.
- Angela Johns: for excellent service on the Archives Team.
- Barbara Tomlinson: for excellent service as a cataloguer on the Library Team.
- Gerry Slowey: for excellent service to the Pedigree Rolls Project, especially in the preparation of completed files for uploading.
- Malcolm Austen: for excellent service as an online events host
- Maria Loreti: for excellence in and commitment to the Microfilms Extraction Project.

8. Any other business

The Chair asked whether there was any further business to discuss.

Question: A member in the room referenced an unresolved personal issue that he had had with the Society dating back to 2021. He had mentioned the matter at the previous AGM and hoped to see further progress on its resolution.

Question: A member in the room asked whether the Society helped members with genealogical brick walls.

Mr Spedding replied that it did, noting that the Society had many volunteers who could offer advice, had within the staff a very experienced genealogist who could help and also ran “brick wall busting” events.

Question: Two members on Zoom enquired about records the Society held that could not be found elsewhere, such as certain parish record images.

Christine Worthington, the Society’s Research Collections Coordinator, replied that the Society did indeed hold such records, referencing, as an example, the “Ye Old Mortality” records of monumental inscriptions. She went on to say that although we didn’t hold parish registers as such, replication of records held by others might still be valuable in the Society’s collection if they have differing indexes. She felt it was useful to note that for the most part, the Society’s transcripts have been contributed by members with special interest and specialist knowledge.

Society of Genealogists

Question: A member on Zoom explained that the Government were looking into the laws governing end of life care and this could be of interest to the Society.

Mr Spedding replied that the Society hadn't yet looked into that but if and/or when any proposed legislative changes had potential genealogical impact, the Society would always engage in any debate about those changes.

Question: A member in the room asked about the Society's learning from its relatively numerous moves over its lifetime.

Mr Spedding answered that there were two lessons. First, budget with care and caution – he was delighted to report that the move to Wharf Road had come in slightly under budget. Second, whilst a challenge, it is always better to sort through items before you box them up for the move. Otherwise, one can end up paying for the moving and storage of material that, having spent time investigating and cataloguing it, proves to be redundant.

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