

## Chairman`s Annual Report – 2011 to 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen, tonight I complete my third year as your Chairman and can I say what a pleasure it has been. Three years sounds quite a long time but in fact it seems to have flown by reflecting, perhaps, and I hope, that we have enjoyed a good three years. Later in the evening you will have the opportunity to elect your next chairman and I trust you and he, or she, will enjoy the next three years as well.

Amongst my concerns is the noticeable fall in the number of members belonging to the Society an issue that has not escaped the notice of your executive committee who will be looking at ways we can attract more people to come and join us. Clearly, this has not yet achieved crisis status but with the certain knowledge that the ageing process takes its toll we can only expect our current membership to continue to decline so it is incumbent on us all to do what we can to draw in new blood thus ensuring we stay a healthy and vibrant society.

Having said all that, I still feel that on the whole, meetings continue to be well attended and that we have continued to enjoy a varied and interesting programme ably constructed by Jackie Cawte at a time when finding speakers is becoming increasingly difficult. Fortunately we only had one problem this year when our Septembers` speaker advised us she could not fulfil her fixture. Happily, in the event, our own Peter Blackmore came to the rescue with his fascinating account of watch and clock making in Runcorn. A brilliant substitution! Furthermore, the weather was somewhat kinder to us this year so we managed much better turn outs for the Christmas party, with its memorable presentation by Brian Halliwell, and our Members evening in January with its three very diverse and interesting contributions. Let us hope that more members will feel able to share their interests with us in the future thus making members evenings a great attraction.

On the subject of our programme, at a time when we still have meetings that, as yet, have no speakers booked, I would again remind members that Jackie and the committee will always be delighted to hear from anyone who has suggestions about any subject or speaker they feel could be of interest to the society. So if you can help please leave your suggestions with the ladies on the table at the back

Although Jo and I missed the annual outing this year I believe the trip to Much Wenlock and Wenlock Priory went down quite well but having visited the venue on previous occasions I can acknowledge it may not have been “every ones cup of tea”. Selecting venues for annual outings that have universal appeal is no easy task so whilst our outings sub-committee do a fantastic job every year, there are always unforeseen snags that can occur causing dissatisfaction and frustration for some. At this point in time I should advise you that little discussion on the venue for this years outing has taken place so far, so you have a splendid opportunity to get involved and submit your suggestions to the committee this evening but by 21<sup>st</sup> March, when we hold our next executive committee meeting, at the latest.

Whilst our publications sub-committee continue to issue the societies news letter, the failure of Runcova II to achieve the necessary level of sales to break even, and our treasurer will say more on that shortly, has led us to conclude that we can not afford to produce Runcova III, in the foreseeable future. So, we are considering the possibility of publishing the material we have collected on the societies website.

The development of an in house research group aimed at undertaking pieces of research that may be of interest to the Society with a view to producing articles for Runcova or the website, information packs for the archives or presentations for members` evenings, has not really advanced any further. Although some people are undertaking pieces of research on their own and Richard Andrew`s investigations of the Sprinch Boatyard have resulted in him exploring public health and “the drainage improvements of 1906” and taking another look at the barge making history of Runcorn which he may be tempted to re-write! In addition, he and Jackie, when following up a clue spotted in Alex Cowan`s recent book on Public Houses has led to them writing an article accepted for publication in the Cheshire Ancestor Family History magazine. So once again I would invite members, who might be interested in “having a go”, to let us know. There are several members with experience who would happily help you get started and Alex will be only too happy to help you navigate the society archives.

The archives continue to increase with more photographs, papers and books. A recent acquisition is the account book of Handley and Beck covering the years 1956 to 1960. As you know, it is the wide range of material stored in the archives that enables us to mount our exhibitions and in the past year we were involved in four of them. Three were at local churches to assist fund raising: at St. Michaels with a theme “The green Road” we presented the history of Greenway Road, the heath Methodist enjoyed a “History through Postcards” and “Runcorn Stone and buildings where it has been used” and at St Edwards we mounted “Runcorn Through the Ages” an exhibition we opened up to school children on the Friday afternoon as well as to the public on the Saturday.

You will all recall the Brindley Exhibition, mounted in the summer together with our friends from the Widnes Historical Society, to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of the present road bridge and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the Transporter Bridge, when we also featured displays on the ferry, the ford, the railway bridge and other proposals. As a result of the resounding success of this exhibition the two societies have been asked to mount another in August of this year on “Sport, Leisure and Pastimes in the two towns”

As part of the Queens Diamond Jubilee celebrations we are mounting an exhibition at St Michaels on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> June with the title “ Royal Occasions in Runcorn” which will feature items from 915AD to the celebrations the previous weekend.

The Society was represented at the annual Cheshire History day at Northwich in October 2011 when we were granted the privilege of a stand in the exhibitors area. This enabled us to mount a display about who we are, what we do, explain the postcard project and offer items for sale. This provoked much interest amongst those attending and several people indicated that they have Runcorn artefacts and books, which they might donate to our archives at sometime in the future. Hopefully we will be allocated a stand at the 2012 History day and mount a similar display again.

Alex tells me that sometimes we receive items that are not relevant to Runcorn but, that we are pleased to accept them and arrange for them to be passed on to appropriate locations. An example of this is the copy letter book from Muspratt & Co., Widnes & Liverpool, which will be passed to the Catalyst Museum. In the past we have given

items to the Air and Space Museum and to the Music Library at Manchester; to the Northamptonshire Record Office; and the Cheshire Record Office. So if you have anything you are disposing of pass it to the society and we will either accept it or find an appropriate home for it.

On the subject of our Archives, which are held at Edgerton Street Library, which will be closing at the end of March this year and will be relocated in the former market hall, we have received assurances from the Lead Councillor for library services that our archive will be accommodated in the new location.

Although there have been no additions to the website during the last year it has still seen a regular number of visitors each month. Earlier in 2011 the method of calculating the number of visits to the site was changed with the result that the visitor numbers appeared to halve within one month, falling to around 1,600 in April. However by January of this year the figures have increased again to over 3,000 in the month. Over 50 enquiries were processed during the year, many of them being referred to our friends in the Runcorn Family History society reflecting enquirers greater interest in their family history rather than the history of the town but most of those relating to our local history were answered by our Archivist. As mentioned earlier we are hoping to use the website more extensively in the future to publish material that was collected for Runcova III and other items of interest.

In drawing this report to a close my penultimate remarks concern our attempts to set up Memorial award schemes for pupils in our local schools in the names of Bill Leathwood and Bert Starkey our deceased founder members and Vice Presidents who sadly passed away last year. As we will hear tributes to both of these exceptional men later I will only comment that they will be greatly missed. In so far as the proposed memorials are concerned I can say that we wrote to 37 schools in the Runcorn District inviting them to consider our proposals, make suggestions and indicate if they would wish to participate. Only four schools replied, a response that certainly took the wind out of our sails and left us somewhat "be-calmed" and drifting. However, I recently met with the Deputy head at St Chads and contacted St Clements primary school, who had not responded to our letter, so I believe I feel a breath of positive wind which gives me some encouragement to hope that we may yet be able to achieve our aim next year if not this year. So we will be renewing our efforts.

Once again I extend my thanks, on your behalf, to your executive committee for all their work and support during the past year and indeed throughout all of my time as your Chairman. I also feel I must take this opportunity to thank Alex Cowan, who probably does more than anyone to promote the life of our Society, for all his hard work developing the archives and the putting together of all the well conceived exhibitions which are becoming renowned throughout the area. I believe we have had three good years and I trust the next three years will be just as good if not better. Finally I thank you all for coming this evening and for the support you demonstrate for your committee. Please keep coming, bring your friends and do not forget that your ideas, suggestions and contributions are vital to the future well being of the Runcorn and District historical Society. Thank you very much; it has been a privilege.