



CHAIR REPORT 2023

Overall, the festival has moved along an upward trajectory in 2023 although there have been disappointments, negative input, and some very irritating and time-wasting obstacles.

For most of the year we have been hindered by NatWest Bank who have no apparent understanding of our function or purpose when assessing our Beneficial Ownership relating to our Business Account and that has been personally very draining and time-wasting, with access to our account being periodically denied because we are simply not able to conform to their stereotyped concept of a business and a business structure. Help has been received from both BIFF and our auditors but still the lengthy questioning phone calls come and the frequency of the freezing of our accounts for apparent non-compliance increase. Help in matters financial was discussed last year, with nothing transpiring, but it is a prime problem for us and, especially myself.

However, on a positive administrative note we have appointed Rachele Howes as our Festival Coordinator. We have never recovered from Bridget's sudden departure in October 2021, and it has been a constant struggle for me to understand how she ran our affairs or where she stored documents and information. As a result, through my own lack of understanding, we have struggled to keep everything organised and efficient. Those at the Royal Russell events at the start of the year will have been impressed with Rachele's calm efficiency and since assuming the Coordinator role she has assimilated the practicalities of the website and Run My Festival entry system with staggeringly impressive skill and insight and has already been of immense help and lightened my load considerably.

Rachele has assumed these roles with the website and entry system from Ophelia and we would wish to thank Ophelia for the reliable and knowledgeable work she has carried out over the past few years regarding these important parts of our operation and public image. Ophelia spent time – and continues to do so - effecting a complete and reliable handover to Rachele so that the latter could begin being effective right from the outset.

Having, in previous years, always relied upon Bridget to prepare the accounts, with Geoffrey Lawrence's valuable assistance, before sending them to be audited, we short-circuited this process by sending all paperwork to the auditors initially for last year's accounts. This solved the problems of total misunderstanding on the part of myself and fellow Trustees having no relevant financial awareness, but it incurred a higher professional charge. The auditors passed on valuable help in bookkeeping, and I have managed to comply with this throughout this financial year so, hopefully, the costs will lessen as the records will be more streamlined this year. The advantage though is that the accounts presented for your approval at this AGM have been audited, as were those of last year, and can be lodged with the Charity Commissioners immediately after the AGM.

However, there were some ambiguities within the Accounts Report brought to our attention by the auditors concerning a note inserted by Bridget that no longer reflected our attitude towards the awarding of prize monies. All 4 current Trustees accept responsibility for this misunderstanding, highlighting further the need for help from someone versed in matters financial.

The actual festival sessions ran effectively, and, in most cases, the numbers were up on last year and the adjudications were well received, although one section did give us cause for concern and, in another section a regular complainer did complain but I was listening in and quickly realised that the complaint was based upon a misunderstanding of what was actually said. A few practical time-tabling difficulties occurred in the Speech and Dance sections, through my own lack of understanding, but these have been resolved for 2024 with more

input from Jenna and Pushpa respectively. The South Asian Music section was quite astonishing in quality, and we had performers from as far as North Wales. With that in mind we have appointed Vamshi Vishnudas as a Trustee to help develop this section even further with his contacts and specialist expertise.

Beyond the proposal to appoint Vamshi as a Trustee the 2023 AGM will also address a few concerns and possible changes within the formation of the Board of Trustees.

As ever, we were grateful for the stewarding help received from our very small team of helpers - Chris Harman, Barry Nicholson, Trixie Muirhead, Judith Dunworth, Judith Barber, Gillian Bibby, Lynda Campbell and Judy Moseley - and the polished professional support of our accompanists, Alan Brown and Craig White.

The Choral section was held as a separate event in the Minster and, although of good quality it was not as well supported as we had hoped so this needs attention. This session was coordinated by Ben Norbury and his report reads as;

The Choral section was held at Croydon Minster on the afternoon of 11th February, Ben Costello adjudicating.

Three choirs took part – the all-female Chamber Choir from Old Palace School, next to the Minster, with around 35 members, and two configurations of the 30-strong North Surrey Barbershop Harmony Club, The Downsmen, based in Leatherhead, who performed first as a Male Voice Choir, and then again (with a costume change) as a barbershop ensemble.

All three performances were most enjoyable, and each choir presented two items of exciting repertoire. The adjudication was comprehensive and encouraging, and feedback after the performances was generally positive, although it was noted that warming up in the unheated church hall was something of a challenge in the cold weather.

The Downsmen brought only one or two supporters, but there was good support for the Old Palace Choir from parents and siblings of around half the performers, and the card reader was an excellent and convenient way to collect admissions on the door.

It was disappointing that our Coleridge-Taylor Prize winner was not able to take part as planned in the opening April weekend of activities marking Croydon's assumption of the London Borough of Culture events at Fairfield Halls. We assume that was due to piano problems at Fairfield, but we were not informed precisely why we missed out as contributors to this important event, especially as one of our Trustees was a member of the organizing committee for this event.

The Gala Concert in Fairfield Halls was a great success, and we received many messages of appreciation from audience members, so we have another such date booked for May 2024.

In the morning of the Concert. we held the Finals of the LMP Concerto Competition and although demanding of those few volunteer helpers on the day it was a good practical arrangement. Sadly, due to funding issues, the Concerto Competition link with the LMP had to be withdrawn in October, after having been advertised, for the 2024 festival. Thankfully, at that point, we had no entries for the concerto so no need for difficult explanations that were not of our making. Looking back over festival records 2024 will be only the 6th year, within the past 28, when our flagship Concerto class has not happened so, let's hope for the future.

The winner of the 2023 LMP Concerto Competition was an exciting young lad, Hassan Marzban, playing recorders with considerable flair and he held the audience enthralled. Sadly, his performance with LMP has been scheduled for the first day of the 2024 festival so festival people cannot support this concert: we really must liaise more closely with the LMP office in future years to avoid this happening again – assuming that LMP find a way to work again with us - especially as we only use 5 days of the year leaving 360 others for it to be scheduled, or, in 2024, 361 other days!

As ever we are desperately short of volunteer help and repeated messages have been sent out and placed in programmes but with zero response. More disappointing was the fact that no fewer than 3 offers of help within the Gala Concert and preceding rehearsals resulted in no-shows which resulted in considerably more, and unexpected work for myself and the volunteers, with little or no time for rest, food, or drink. However, the usual small nucleus of volunteer helpers – Chris Harman, Judith Barber, and Lynda Campbell - continues to be loyal and very much appreciated by all of us. If the 2024 festival grows beyond that of 2023, we may well need to cancel some sessions and refund entry fees due to insufficient volunteer stewarding assistance.

The consideration that we must all face over the next few months is whether we can arrange a festival in 2025 with so few helpers. My own term of office runs out at this AGM, but I shall continue to organise the music section but, if it grows, we cannot rely on the select few who offer invaluable help but are not getting younger, and we are currently seriously undersubscribed with volunteers. Whoever takes over from me must make this difficult decision and will need your help in obtaining further helpers or else, the difficult decision becomes, very sadly, inevitable.

The 2024 festival dates are January 26-28 and February 3-4 with the Ashcroft concert booked for May 25.

The syllabus for the 2024 Festival was launched on September 15th and, on that first day, there no fewer than 3 enquiries as to why there was no Western Dance section. We have kept our membership of All England Dance alive, but we have had nobody come forward with the knowledge and willingness to undertake this demanding role of Dance Coordinator. There is clearly a lot of interest from local dance schools because we have received several enquiries as to why we still have no Western Dance section but when we ask back if they know of any suitable volunteers the correspondence chain breaks down. Rather concerningly, some dance schools write implying that it is expected that we should be still running that section but are not able to commit their expertise and spare time to effecting this. We have retained our membership of All England Dance in the hope that a volunteer(s) puts their hand up to help in future years, especially as 2025 will be an All England qualifying year. Somewhat ironically, our first entrant for the 2024 festival – completing their entry on September 22nd – was a South Asian dancer.

As ever, the festival remains deeply grateful for the support and assistance of the Royal Russell staff who have gone out of their way to make everything run smoothly both before and during the events.