



## Not Only, But ALSo: Spring 2025

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# The Alliance of Literary Societies AGM Weekend in Brighton

## Hosted by the Kipling Society 16 - 18 May 2025

<b>Friday 16 May</b>	Two-course welcome dinner at the Old Ship Hotel, Kings Road, Brighton, BN1 1NR. Menu options will be sent after registration.
7.30pm	The Old Ship is on the seafront in central Brighton. Information about the hotel can be found at <a href="https://www.oldshipbrighton.co.uk/">https://www.oldshipbrighton.co.uk/</a>
<b>Saturday 17 May</b>	ALS AGM and conference at Bramber House, Refectory Road, University of Sussex, Falmer, BN1 9QU
10.00	Registration, coffee/tea and browsing of society stalls.
10.30	Welcome from Andrew Scragg, Chair of the Kipling Society, and Marty Ross, Chair of the ALS
10.45	Welcome by the President of the ALS, James Naughtie
11.00	Rudyard Kipling – his life, works and legacy – Andrew Scragg, Chairman of the Kipling Society
11.45	Short Break
12.00	Rudyard Kipling in relation to other authors - Dr Alex Bubb
12.45	Lunch - and a further chance to browse the society stalls, visit the University of Sussex exhibition, and buy raffle tickets
14.00	ALS AGM
14.45	Raffle draw
15.00	Writers and their Houses – Tim Pye, National Curator, Libraries, the National Trust
15.45	Tea/coffee break and final chance to view stalls.
16.10	The Role of Literary Societies in the Digital Age - Dominic Edwardes (Trollope Society), followed by small panel discussion chaired by Jan Montefiore.
17.05	Invitation to attend 2026 ALS AGM from the Edward Thomas Fellowship
17.10	Closing words.

19.15 for 19.30 A three-course dinner at Hotel du Vin, 2 Ship Street, Brighton, BN1 1AD. Menu options will be sent after registration forms have been received.

Hotel du Vin is just off the seafront in central Brighton, adjacent to the Old Ship Hotel. Information about the hotel can be found at <https://www.hotelduvin.com/locations/brighton/>

### **Sunday 18 May**

11.00

Free guided walking tour of Rottingdean, where Rudyard Kipling (1897-1902) and Angela Thirkell amongst others lived. Led by members of the Kipling Society and the Angela Thirkell Society. Please meet outside the White Horses Hotel.

(<https://www.thewhitehorseshotel-rottingdean.co.uk/>) on the seafront at Rottingdean. There is easy access by bus from central Brighton. Car parking is available, but spaces close to the meeting point may be busy.

**OR**

11.00

Guided tour of Rudyard Kipling's house, Bateman's, Burwash, TN19 7DS, led by members of the Kipling Society. Attendees should make their own way there. Access by public transport is likely to be difficult. The property is National Trust, so the tour will be free to members of the NT but non-members will need to pay an entry fee. Car parking is also free to NT members but there is a charge for non-members. Information about Bateman's can be found at <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/sussex/batemans>

## **GENERAL INFORMATION**

**Booking.** Please book your place by completing the registration form and paying by one of the methods given at <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com/agm-weekend/> Last date for booking is **Friday 11 April**. Full details of venues, including directions, will be sent to you once you have registered. Please complete a separate form for each person attending. A combined payment may be made, providing this is made clear in an accompanying note.

**Stall Space.** There will be plenty of room for society stalls at the conference. If you would like to book a space to promote your society, please would one member of your society indicate this on the registration form.

**University of Sussex Library Special Collections Exhibition.** On the Saturday, the University will be exhibiting a selection of material relating to Rudyard Kipling and other authors whose papers have been deposited with it. This will be in the same room as the society stalls.

**Raffle prizes.** It is part of ALS tradition that, if possible, people bring items to be included as prizes in the raffle. This is often a good way to advertise your author to others. Please leave raffle prizes at the registration desk on Saturday. Tickets will be on sale until 15 minutes before the AGM.

**Saturday dinner entertainment.** Traditionally, we have provided our own entertainment at the Saturday evening dinner. Each society is encouraged to bring along a favourite extract (prose or poetry) to read out. If you would like to read, please indicate this on the registration form. As this is a popular activity, please keep your readings to a short poem or an equivalent length of prose, ideally lasting no more than two minutes. Readers' names will be drawn randomly. If there is great demand, we may run out of time for all to read.

**Menu choices.** These will be notified to those attending nearer to the date of the event,

**Accommodation.** For those wanting to stay in Brighton, rooms have been reserved for the ALS at a number of hotels. These can be booked using the following link <https://book.passkey.com/go/ALSG0525>. There are, of course, many other hotels in the area. A number of other events are taking place that weekend in Brighton, so early reservation is recommended.

**Parking:** For those travelling by car, parking in the centre of Brighton can be expensive. We have been able to arrange free parking from Friday through to Sunday on the university campus. Details will be sent to all those who register. There is frequent, easy access by train, bus or Uber/taxi between the campus and the centre of Brighton.

**Accessibility:** The conference venue is on the third floor. A lift is available. Unfortunately, there is no hearing loop. The restaurants for the Friday and Saturday dinners are on the ground floor and step-free access is available.

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## The 'Inklings' pub in Oxford, once the haunt of Tolkien, C S

Lewis, and others, is being restored after lying empty since 2020. Familiarly known as the 'Bird and Babe', The Eagle and Child is now owned by American tech billionaire Larry Ellison, who intends to revive the pub while utilising some rooms for Ellison Institute of Technology purposes.



# Arthur Ransome and Russia:

a double-length article to highlight an aspect of the life of the 2024 host society's author.

Chris Birt, [The Arthur Ransome Society](#)

In 1913 Arthur felt he just had to get away abroad from a number of personal problems; he had become fascinated by some Russian fairy tales he had come across, so he decided to go to Russia to study these further. So in Spring 1913 Arthur left for St Petersburg, where he was met by the Gellibrand family, old friends from his Chelsea days. They took him to their estate in Terioki, over the border in Finland (then a province of Russia). There he set about learning Russian, teaching himself by studying children's reading primers. Back in the UK later that year, he was commissioned in early 1914 to write a guidebook to St Petersburg, so he returned to Russia immediately to work on this. He completed the guidebook in July 1914, but it was never published owing to the outbreak of the First World War.

Now properly based in St Petersburg for the first time, he soon met Harold Williams, who spoke Russian very fluently. Harold was married to Ariadne Tyrkova; they and Arthur became close friends. That spring Arthur was suffering severely from piles, and Harold and Ariadne Williams invited him to rest and recuperate in their country house at Vergezha, beside the river Volkov; Arthur spent that early summer working on *Old Peter's Russian Tales*, some of which was published in 1916. However, he returned to St Petersburg for an operation on his piles on 9<sup>th</sup> August; subsequently, as it happened, the St Petersburg correspondent of the *Daily News* became severely ill, and from September 1915 Arthur was asked to carry on his work; later he was confirmed as the permanent correspondent of this newspaper. In that role he met many new people, including several British citizens working in Russia, including Sir George Buchanan, the UK Ambassador; Robert Bruce Lockhart, the Consul General; Morgan Phillips Price, who with Harold Williams were both correspondents of the *Manchester Guardian*; and William Peters, a young economist from Aberdeen, who was working for the Russian Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Arthur visited the front three times in 1916, as well as going to Romania for a substantial visit there, supposedly to cover a major campaign, but this came to nothing. Early in that year he had rented a flat (his only semi-permanent residence in St Petersburg) in Glinka Street. By early 1917 he was already recognised as an expert war reporter. He was instrumental in setting up a news agency in St Petersburg designed to bring knowledge of the western front to the attention of Russians (to demonstrate that others were fighting the Germans as well as the Russians!). However, Bruce Lockhart insisted on appointing Hugh Walpole as the head of this news agency, but this was something that Walpole was not suited to, and the whole news agency soon folded.



The building in Glinka Street, St Petersburg, where Arthur had his flat: with the two windows on the second floor, on the end of the building (a corner flat).

As already a skilled war reporter, Arthur was in an ideal position to be an expert witness of the first revolution, in March 1917 – in fact he could watch much of the activity (and shooting!) from the windows of his flat. His reporting was authoritative but generally sympathetic to the revolution (he wrote ‘Russia ... stands as the greatest free nation in Europe’). Maybe because of his sympathetic reports, he was the only western reporter to be invited to attend the first meeting of the Petrograd Soviet; he attended this regularly and later the First All Russia Soviet. Arthur was trying by all means to persuade the UK Government to take more interest in Russia, and to show some sympathy for the revolution. On 19<sup>th</sup> June he heard Lenin speak in the Tauride Palace, at the First All Russia Soviet, stating that his party was ready to lead the nation. On 9<sup>th</sup> October he returned to the UK, in a further vain attempt to explain Russia to the Government and in the UK generally.



The auditorium in the Tauride Palace where Arthur was the only foreign correspondent to attend the first All-Russia Soviet, addressed by Lenin; Lenin spoke from the lectern at which the author is standing, looking away.

Being in the UK, Arthur missed the second 1917 revolution; he returned to Russia on 9<sup>th</sup> December, arriving in St Petersburg just after Christmas. Immediately he went to the Foreign Ministry for news and was able to meet Trotsky, who explained his need for peace, saying that proper democracy could only really follow peace with Germany. There he also met Evgenia Petrovna Shelepina, Trotsky's secretary. He shared a potato-based meal with her and her sister on their first meeting; after a whirlwind courtship Evgenia was to become his life-long partner (and eventually his second wife, in 1924). Trotsky was to agree with Arthur that the western allies should attend the Brest-Litovsk peace talks – but they refused to do so.

In 1918 Arthur's struggle to get the UK to talk to Russia continued; this became a battle between the *Daily News* and the *Manchester Guardian* (both favouring development of relationships) and *The Times*, which supported the Government's negative position. In January of 1918 he met Trotsky every day for discussions, and at this time became extremely friendly with Radek; Radek and his wife became close personal friends of Arthur and Genia (as Evgenia was now known). It was on 19<sup>th</sup> January that Genia suggested to Arthur that they should live together.

For safety from the civil war they moved to Stockholm, from where Arthur continued to report as best he could, but on 27<sup>th</sup> September he was recruited formerly as an agent ('spy') by His Majesty's Government. When it was safer, Arthur and Genia returned to Russia in February 1919, where Arthur had several meetings with Lenin (playing chess with him) and with other Bolshevik leaders, and this provided the material for his *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*, which was published that June. On return to the UK that Spring Arthur was at first arrested as a Bolshevik sympathiser! However, this was soon resolved, and Clifford Sharp of MI6 informed him of the terrible atrocities committed by the 'whites'. Later that year he returned to Russia, via Tallinn, where he met Mr A Piip, the Estonian Foreign Minister, who was seeking peace with Russia. He took Mr Piip's message to Moscow, crossing the front line while in some danger, and later returned to Tallinn with Genia (again crossing the front lines).

From 1920, Arthur and Genia lived together, first in Estonia and later in Latvia, from where Arthur would make frequent visits to Russia. He was now reporting for the *Manchester Guardian*, after C. P. Scott, its editor offered him a post. That same year he returned to his flat in Glinka Street; it was after this visit that Arthur wrote *The Crisis in Russia*, as an education (as he hoped!) for the British Government. However, as reporting did not now take all of his time, Arthur and Genia bought their first boat, *Slug*, and in 1921 *Kittiwake*. However, Arthur found a serious boatbuilder, a Mr Eggers, who built *Racundra* for him and Genia; after their first cruise around the Baltic, Arthur wrote *Racundra's First Cruise*, which was published in 1923.

In December 1923 Arthur was back in Russia, in time to report on Lenin's funeral in January 1924; he wrote 'I had a curious feeling that I was present at the founding of a new religion'. Later that year, after getting married in Tallinn, they returned to the UK, to a cottage in the south Lake District. However, the *Manchester Guardian* sent him several more times to Russia; he was also sent to report on events in both Egypt and China. In 1928 he bravely gave up this reliable source of income, to turn to book writing – *Swallows and Amazons* would soon appear, followed by eleven sequels.

# Member Society Events and News

## P G Wodehouse Society

A host of celebrities, including Sir Stephen Fry and Alexander Armstrong, have recorded audio podcasts for The PG Wodehouse Society (UK), to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of PG Wodehouse.

The first in the series of audio podcasts was released on **Valentine's Day 2025**, 50 years to the day since the great writer died at the age of 93. The nine recordings are being released weekly. They feature nine VIP fans, all of whom are PG Wodehouse Society (UK) Patrons, delivering amusing, touching, and often personal insights into their love of the great writer. The World of Wodehouse Podcasts feature Alexander Armstrong, Simon Brett, Ben Elton, Sir Stephen Fry, Martin Jarvis, Neil Pearson, Nigel Rees, Lucy Tregear, and Lynne Truss.



This initiative is just one of a number of celebratory events in 2025 to mark Wodehouse's death, details of which have yet to be announced.

Alexander Armstrong, the Society's President, introduces the series saying: 'Pelham Grenville Wodehouse - always known as Plum to his family and friends - was one of the most prolific writers and arguably the greatest humourist of the 20th Century. Not just books, but plays, hundreds of short stories and a series of Broadway musicals.' He adds: 'Come and share the fun that's to be had in the wonderful *World of Wodehouse*.'

The podcasts deliver personal insights such as the fact that Simon Brett, the writer and producer, attended the same school as Wodehouse - Dulwich College. Some of the Patrons have nurtured a life-long love of Wodehouse's writing having each been introduced to the works as children. The great comedian, Ben Elton says: 'At 11 years old I'd found the key to a lifetime of joy and inspiration'. Sir Stephen Fry, who starred as Jeeves in the much-acclaimed Jeeves & Wooster series, says: 'A new planet had swung into my ken' on being presented with his first Wodehouse book aged ten. Lynne Truss, the acclaimed writer, says: 'I wish long life to the PG Wodehouse Society (UK)'. The PG Wodehouse Society (UK) is a voluntary literary association open to people anywhere in the world. It is run entirely by volunteers and has approximately one thousand members.

As they are released, the recordings will be available on YouTube from **14 February 2025** at

<https://youtube.com/@pgwodehousepodcasts?si=-uY5LioeTdrDzK-K> and will also be accessible via a link on the Society's website: <https://www.pgwodehousesociety.org.uk/>



## Children's Books History Society

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will be on Wednesday **26 March** in the Gradidge Room, The Art Workers' Guild, 6 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AT, beginning at 6.30 pm. (Doors open at 6.00 pm, when drinks and nibbles will be served). Non-members welcome.



After the formal business of the AGM, Ian Archie Beck will give a talk on his career illustrating children's books.

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## R S Thomas & M E Eldridge Society

25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of R S Thomas' Death

**12 – 15 June - 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Festival** in Aberdaron, north Wales.

*Science | Theology | Creation* is the theme, with a variety of renowned speakers and experiential events integrating poetry and the landscape, music and art. Full details of the programme and speakers: [www.rstthomaspoetry.co.uk](http://www.rstthomaspoetry.co.uk)

**15<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> July - Brecon Choir Festival** is integrating RS Thomas as their theme 'Music, Man & Machine' with new compositions of choral works inspired by Thomas's poetry.

[www.breconchoirfestival.co.uk](http://www.breconchoirfestival.co.uk)

**25<sup>th</sup> September - 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event** for RS Thomas, Bangor Cathedral. 12:30-13:15pm Eucharist Service. 15:00 – 16:00 'Hymn to a Welshman' celebration of the life and work of RS Thomas: inspiration for music & art. Harpist, Mared Emlyn and art by Terry Duffy. [www.rstthomaspoetry.co.uk](http://www.rstthomaspoetry.co.uk)

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## Lewis Carroll Society

Oxford's annual 'Alice's Day' will be on **Saturday 5 July**, with, as usual, a huge range of free activities throughout the city. This year's theme is 'Quests and Adventure'. The Lewis Carroll Society's lectures, at the Bodleian Library in the morning, will include an interview with Caroline Ritson, who decorated the Society's 'Looking for Alice' ox (see next item); Joe Cheal, the author of *Alice and Gramophone Discovery*; and a Christ Church librarian, on its recent huge bequest of Carrolliana. On the Sunday (**6 July**) there will be guided walks.

<https://www.storymuseum.org.uk/about-us/alices-day-1>

Late last year, **The Lewis Carroll Society** acquired its own ox! Fret not, it was not a real one, but 'Looking for Alice', one of a herd of sculptures auctioned to raise funds for Oxford's Sobell House Hospice Charity. The Society's objective was to ensure that this particular four-foot-high ox, decorated by local artist Caroline Ritson with an array of familiar Wonderland characters, would remain in public view in the city which had inspired the story.



▲ It was a very rainy, 'Pool of Tears', kind of day! The spire of Oxford Cathedral and Tom Tower (both within Christ Church) are to the right. Photo: Tracy Gribble.

The successful bid was made using a combination of the Society's own funds and those of individual members, and on 27 January, Charles Dodgson's birthday, it was formally installed in Oxford's busy central Westgate Shopping Centre. The reveal was made by Oxford's Lord Mayor, and among the guests was Dodgson's great-great niece. The event received wide coverage in the local print and online media, including BBC online:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c334r1n5vkxo>

'Looking for Alice' is now positioned on the Westgate terrace, where it gazes, appropriately enough, towards Christ Church, where Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) lived all his adult life and where the real Alice was the daughter of the Dean. It is the only one of the sculptures to be retained in the city centre, on show to tens of thousands of visitors and locals

for many years to come, and with the bonus of being an attractive and informative permanent advert for both LCS and Sobell House. (The auction raised over £150,000, and one other ox with a local literary association was called 'Northern Lights'.)

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## Jane Austen Society (Midlands)

In honour of Jane Austen's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday this year, Hamstall Ridware and the Jane Austen Society (Midlands) will be hosting a joint event in the grounds of Hamstall Ridware Church. This will include an afternoon tea, tour of the Church, a talk on Jane Austen and dancing. The event will take place on **Saturday, 12 July 2025**. Although not obligatory, regency attire is encouraged.

During the early part of August 1806, Jane, her mother, and her sister Cassandra were staying at Stoneleigh Abbey as guests of Mrs Austen's cousin, the Reverend Thomas Leigh.

As they were further north than their usual journeying they decided to accept an earlier invitation from Reverend Edward Cooper, Jane's first cousin, to visit him at Hamstall Ridware in Staffordshire, which is about nine miles north of Lichfield.



They set off for Hamstall Ridware some thirty-eight miles away from Stoneleigh Abbey on August 14<sup>th</sup> of 1806. Jane did profess to 'like first Cousins to be first Cousins and interested in each other.' 'They are but one remove from Brother and Sister' and although Jane was not particularly keen on Edward's views, she did keep closely in touch with him.

Hamstall Ridware has certain attributes that are used by Jane in *Sense and Sensibility*. In the novel the fictional Delaford has many features that Hamstall has: 'a nice old fashioned place, full of comforts and conveniences', 'quite shut in with great garden walls that are covered with the best fruit trees in the county'. 'Then there is a dove-cote, some delightful stew-ponds [fish-ponds], and a very pretty canal... it is close to the church... a butcher hard by in the village, and a parson-house within a stone's throw.' So, her visit could have given her inspiration for her description of Delaford.

While Jane was with her cousin at Hamstall, *Lovers' Vows* was advertised in the *Staffordshire Advertiser* as being performed at Cheadle, Staffordshire. So, she could have attended a performance of it while she was there, as Cheadle is only twenty-one miles from where she was staying.

The party remained with her cousin for about five weeks until September 26<sup>th</sup> when they left for Southampton where they had lodged earlier in the year.

This will be a ticketed event. To keep up to date on when tickets will be released, please follow us on our social media pages:

facebook.com/Hamstall Ridware

facebook.com/JaneAustenSocietyMidlands

@JaneAustenSociety\_Midlands

## Shaw Society

The Shaw Society has organised several literary walks that combine the wit and wisdom of Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries with a gentle stroll through London and a sociable refreshment stop.

Each **August-Bank-Holiday Sunday** there is a 'Shaw Crawl'. Members and their friends and some new acquaintances start by gathering in Fitzroy Square, in front of one of Shaw's early homes in London. A few members volunteer to read short passages from his plays, letters and other relevant pieces by and about Shaw on the steps of his former home. The theme for the 2024 Shaw Crawl was 'Saints and Sinners', and included visits to the Bedford Hotel for refreshments and St George's Bloomsbury, a beautiful Hawksmoor Church, where Dr Philip Wilson delivered an erudite and very enjoyable lecture (available on YouTube).



Shaw and Oscar Wilde Society members mingle in the Café Royal in Regent Street.

In September 2024 a tour of London's Theatre-land was enjoyed jointly with the Oscar Wilde Society. The Shaw Society would be pleased to discuss joint walks with other literary societies and would also like to welcome their members to join our next Shaw Crawl on **24 August 2025**. Contact [esme@shawsociety.org.uk](mailto:esme@shawsociety.org.uk) for more information.

## The John Clare Trust is seeking a new trustee

Are you passionate about promoting the legacy of John Clare helping to secure the future of his historic home? Then please consider joining our board at an exciting time of growth and renewal.



As a trustee, you will play a central role in shaping our strategy and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the John Clare Cottage. Sharing your professional skills and expertise, you will support us in introducing Clare's powerful messages - our timeless right to, and responsibility for, the natural world - to new and larger audiences.

The ideal candidate will demonstrate expertise in one or more of the following areas:

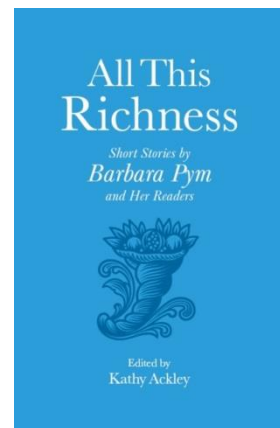
- Fundraising and grant applications.
- Governance and legal compliance.
- Heritage preservation and museum development.
- Education and outreach (particularly with children and young people).
- Finance and budgeting.

Trustees attend board meetings bimonthly (these can be attended online) and occasional in person events at John Clare Cottage in Helpston, Cambridgeshire.

For more information please contact Keira Harvey [info@clarecottage.org](mailto:info@clarecottage.org)

## New publication from The Barbara Pym Society

Barbara Pym found richness in all that she observed and heard, from which she created a fictional world that is engaging and entertaining. That world is also a source of inspiration for her readers.



This joint US/UK publication by the Pym Society, released in 2024 to coincide with the Society's 30th anniversary, contains three short stories by Pym herself (one previously unpublished) and a further 25 selected from entries from the annual Ellen J. Miller Memorial short story competition, written by Pym enthusiasts from around the world.

Jilly Cooper comments: 'As a massive Barbara Pym fan, I am thrilled to see some of her stories get a second airing, and she would have been so happy that she is inspiring a new generation of writers.' Copies (£10 & £3 p&p) can be ordered from the Society website:

<https://barbara-pym.org/all-this-richness/>

## Establishment of The C P Snow Literary Society

2025 marks the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Baron Snow, Charles Percy Snow, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1980 at the age of 74. Additionally, October will also see the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth in 1905.

In order to commemorate these two events, as well as to revive interest in the work of a now largely forgotten author, 2025 also marks the establishment of the CP Snow Literary Society.

Charles Percy Snow was an English physicist, novelist, and public intellectual. He worked as a research scientist at Cambridge University in the 1920s and 30s before serving in various government positions during and after WWII. Today, he is probably best known for his 1959 Rede Lecture 'The Two Cultures,' which argued that a chasm had grown between the scientific and literary intellectuals in Western society and is still cited to this day. Snow also wrote an 11-novel sequence called 'Strangers and Brothers' about English public life. He was made a life peer as Baron Snow in 1964.

At present only a very small society, the aim is to move towards achieving charitable status soon with the aims of the Charity being:

To advance for the public benefit, education and interest in the life and works of the English author Charles Percy Snow, support and undertaking of appropriate research, promote and undertake relevant educational opportunities and any other such related charitable purposes as the trustees may from time to time decide.

Charles Percy Snow is now often overlooked but, in our current age in which science and the arts look set to diverge further due to the rapid expansion of AI, he is more relevant than ever.

Those interested in joining and helping to shape the future of the Society can contact us at: Peter Newman, c/o Ardvannie Railway Cottage, Edderton, Tain, Ross-shire. IV19 1LD.

Email: [CPSnowLitSoc@gmail.com](mailto:CPSnowLitSoc@gmail.com) Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61571416611884>

Instagram: @cpsnowlitsoc

X/Twitter: <https://x.com/CPSnowLitSoc>

## A members' offer from The Birmingham & Midland Institute

Serena Trowbridge, Senior Vice-President

The Birmingham & Midland Institute (BMI) has been at the heart of Birmingham's cultural life since it was founded by Act of Parliament in 1854. Created 'for the Diffusion and Advancement of Science, Literature and Art amongst all Classes of Persons resident in Birmingham and the Midland Counties', the BMI continues to provide lectures, exhibitions and events, as well as rooms available to hire for meetings and conferences.

Originally housed in an impressive building in Paradise Street, Birmingham, the BMI moved to smaller premises in Margaret Street in 1965, originally the premises of the subscription Birmingham Library, with which the BMI merged. Consequently, the Library, with its holdings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, is now available to members and researchers for both consultation and borrowing. Early in 2024 we sold off a small, modern part of the building (purchased in 1974 and subsequently underused), and separation works have now taken

place. This puts the BMI into a more secure financial situation, and we are now focusing on bidding for funding to carry out further works on our beautiful historic building.

The BMI has been associated with many significant figures over the years. An early President was Charles Dickens, whose readings of Christmas stories, including *A Christmas Carol*, in Birmingham's Town Hall raised funds for the Institute. Other notable Presidents include Charles Kingsley, Sir Arthur Sullivan, Sir William Blake Richmond, Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Guglielmo Marconi, Clement Atlee, André Maurois, Dame Ninette de Valois, Sir Peter Scott, Yehudi Menuhin, Fay Weldon, Jenny Uglow, Professor Stanley Wells, Jonathan Coe and, most recently, Professor Sir David Cannadine. The current President is Sir Paul Nurse.



The Institute is an enthusiastic supporter of both the arts and sciences, and has a suite of Institute Laureates, who support and promote the work of the Institute. We also award annual Fellowships.

The BMI also hosted the Birmingham Central Literary Association, running for over 100 years though sadly now defunct. This was an active organisation (particularly since it seems they produced a cricket team which played other Birmingham organisations such as the Birmingham & Edgbaston Debating Society), publishing journals, holding lectures and running competitions. At the BMI we have boxes of papers, journals, a medal and a gavel associated with the CLA.

The BMI also played a role in the founding and development of the ALS. Anita Fernandez Young tells me that Kathleen and Bill Adams, of the George Eliot Fellowship, founded the Alliance in 1973 as a loose collection of interested societies, but when they decided in 1988 to formalise the organisation, this was done at the BMI because the first Chairman of the ALS was Joe Hunt, administrator and librarian of the BMI. The Secretary was Herbert 'Bill' Woodward, who was chairman of the Birmingham branch of the Dickens Fellowship which met at the BMI, and he was also a member of the Johnson Society (Lichfield), the Francis Brett Young Society (Worcestershire and Black Country) and the Housman Society (Shropshire). The organisation was at that stage firmly based in the Midlands. Joe Hunt himself was President of the Housman Society and a member of several other societies, so the BMI was the obvious starting point for the organisation, although the two men who came up with the logo were Dickens Fellowship members from London. Joe Hunt made the

facilities of the BMI available to the group and its convenient position made it an attractive venue for meetings and 'seminars' as the annual sessions were called, and the BMI also acted as the ALS's bankers.

We at the BMI are delighted that we are now\* members of the ALS, and we would be delighted to welcome any member societies to visit us and explore our collections. **We offer a 10% discount on room bookings for registered charities, but for the duration of 2025 we will increase that to 15% for ALS-affiliated societies.** We also have a lovely tea room! You can find out more at <https://www.bmi.org.uk/>

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### A Social Get-together on Zoom on 18 September 2024: 'Significant Others'

Two summaries from contributors:

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Laura McNeal, [Robert Browning Society](#)

Miriam Al Jamil, [Burney Society UK](#)

One of Robert Browning's closest friends in Italy was the expatriate American sculptor, William Wetmore Story, whose most famous work is 'The Angel of Grief.' Browning and Story were part of an Anglo-Italian circle that included Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, and Henry James, who begrudgingly wrote William Story's biography. Thus we know that in May of 1861, a month before Elizabeth Barrett Browning died, Robert and his son Pen were invited by the Story family to the Palazzo Barberini in Rome to meet Hans Christian Andersen, who read half 'The Ugly Duckling'. Robert then performed 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin,' which, according to James, 'led to the formation of a grand march through the spacious Barberini apartment, with Story doing his best on a flute in default of bagpipes'. The day after Robert Browning died, Story wrote to Pen Browning about their 40 years of friendship, saying, 'I do not think that a small or mean thought ever knocked at the door of his spirit—much less ever was allowed to enter— Ever large hearted as large minded, grand in all his impulses—generous in all his feelings—vivid in his enthusiasms and the most living man I ever knew.'

Francis Burney, the writer and diarist who achieved unexpected celebrity status after the publication of her novels *Evelina* in 1778 and *Cecilia* in 1782, was staying with her sister in the small village of Mickleham in Surrey when she was introduced to the newly arrived group of French Constitutionalist émigrés who had settled nearby at Juniper Hall. The group included the impoverished aristocrat General Alexandre d'Arblay. His intense relationship with Frances grew and they were married in the church at Mickleham in 1793, when he was 39 and she was 41.

D'Arblay's attempts to regain his possessions and career in France led him back there and Frances joined him in 1802, but they became trapped for 10 years when hostilities resumed. He remained loyal to the restored Bourbons and during the Waterloo campaign was tasked with processing deserters. Frances' fraught efforts to reach her husband after he was injured by the kick of a horse make harrowing reading. Eventually they returned to England to live in Bath. However, D'Arblay, the love of Frances' life, never recovered from his injuries and died in 1818 at the age of 64.

## A Christmas party on Zoom on 18 December 2024:

‘What Christmas present would you give your author, and why?’

The recording is available online at <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com/news-2/> but here are some summaries of the PRESENTations, in alphabetical order by society:

Susan Bailes, [The Children’s Books History Society](#)

My Christmas present would be a Fortnum and Mason 1 kg crate of Turkish Delight , from Istanbul, with a tempting flavour selection of rose, lemon, pistachio, almond, honey and apricot priced at £40.00. This would be the perfect gift for Edmund Pevensie, who with three other children, Peter, Susan and Lucy features in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, the first instalment of the classic Narnia series by C S Lewis, published in 1950, just in time for Christmas.

In Narnia, it is ‘always winter but never Christmas,’ a product of the White Witch’s evil magic. The novel is set in war time when rationing extended to timber, which made Christmas trees harder to come by, and confectionery rationing did not end until February of 1953. When the White Witch asks Edmund ‘What would you like best to eat?’ he doesn’t hesitate and requests the sweet that would be the most difficult and expensive to obtain. Edmund is so consumed with desire for more of this irresistible magic confection that he forms an alliance with the White Witch to betray his siblings and lure them to her.

Legend has it that centuries ago in the courts of Constantinople, the Sultan Mahmud II ordered his confectioner to craft the utmost pleasure to sweeten the harmony in his harem. Pleased by the new

sweet he named Bekir chief confectioner and later it was named ‘Turkish Delight’ by a Victorian adventurer. Never successfully manufactured in Europe, *Punch* magazine ran a cartoon when ‘Lumps of Delight’ was first imported in 1861, inspiring speciality shops. In *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Charles Dickens takes Rosa on a visit to one.

Edmund is dishonest, spiteful, and eager for his own gain, nevertheless the magical properties of this Turkish delight make it hard to blame him for reaching for the box the White Witch offers and greedily filling his mouth. My Christmas gift would provide an alternative plot to the novel, spare Edmund’s guilt and the need for Aslan’s sacrifice. But perhaps Mr Tummis, the Beaver family or another character might be bribed by the White Witch with another offering they could not refuse? I wonder...

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Anita Fernandez Young, [Dickens Fellowship and Wilkie Collins Society](#)

I’ve thought rather hard about this, but I haven’t planned very much. I’ve been thinking about what one might give to Charles Dickens for Christmas. And I decided, if it were up to me, I would give him yet another fancy waistcoat. He loved waistcoats, and he was a very, very snappy dresser.

I was trying to think of a gift to give him in his own time, but do you know, he and his friend Wilkie Collins – and I’m a member of the Wilkie Collins Society as well, so I’m going to speak for them too – I felt that probably the best gift that we could give



them, if indeed we could time travel for them, would be the gift of paracetamol.

They both had tiresome, boring, painful, uncomfortable conditions. It might have meant that Wilkie didn't become addicted to laudanum. It might have given Dickens some relief from... the rather embarrassing things that he suffered from, because it is, to some extent, a sort of tightening medicine, you know. And so I really felt that, if I could time travel my gift back from today to them, rather than giving them the gift of computers on which to write their various works and to develop this, they didn't need any help of that kind.

What they needed help with was in their very, very personal, intimate lives. So I would think... also, another medical piece of assistance that they might have benefited from would have been Durex. Because both of them experienced rather nasty episodes of venereal diseases.

Okay, so I don't know quite why my mind is running on these medical things, but I really felt that, if I could give Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens a real Christmas present that they would have found extremely beneficial, it would have been to give them the assistance of modern medicine.

Because their lives would have been easier. Dickens's life would perhaps have been longer if we'd been able to give him statins, for example. There are an awful lot – at my age, I'm being recommended to take all sorts of things, and I don't take anything at all – but it does make me appreciate what modern medicine might have had to offer to two gentlemen in the mid-Victorian period who had all sorts of difficulties which we might have been able to alleviate.

So that's my idea of Christmas presents. Fancy waistcoats, yes – easy. I imagine that Dickens was given lots of fancy waistcoats, embroidered slippers, pen wipers, all sorts of lovely Victorian things. But what he really needed and what he would have benefited from would have been paracetamol and Durex.

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Sati McKenzie, [Dickens Fellowship](#)

The one present I would give to all the Victorian writers that I've loved and admired - Dickens, Trollope, Thackeray, Gaskell, Eliot, Hardy..... would be a laptop, a nice, easy one to use. They could then write whenever, wherever they found inspiration. They could take it with them on trains, the Uncommercial Traveller going to an inn, observing everything, taking photos and even recording interesting scenes and conversations.

And then..... access to the internet. Every time I read John Foster's biography of Dickens and how he was expecting chapters from his novels or impressions of his travels in America, France and Italy, I always wonder, how did Dickens dare send the only copy of a handwritten manuscript by post? What if it got lost? He would have to rewrite the whole thing. I get nightmares just thinking of that.

So, I would give them a laptop each, light and easy to carry, with a very simple word processor, Photoshop and connection to the Internet. Also, somebody on call if they need technical support. I would put myself at their disposal if necessary for as long as I live.

They could write when and where they chose, make changes easily and then have the internet to communicate with colleagues. The internet as it evolved,

proved a great help to scientists in the 70s and 80s for rapid exchange of ideas. I would give Victorian authors the same facility. That would be my present to them all.

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Janet Kennerly, [Gaskell Society](#)

Last year I mentioned Mary Taylor, who was a school friend of Charlotte Brontë. And of course, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote the biography of Charlotte Brontë. She wrote to Mary Taylor, who was Charlotte Brontë's school friend in New Zealand, to gather further information before it was published.

Elizabeth Gaskell's letter took anything between six to eight weeks to arrive by sea, if at all, because of course, there were many tragedies at sea. And there would have been a pause while Mary replied, giving a think about what she needed to know. She was a very busy and successful business lady. So then another six to eight weeks for the letter to arrive back in Manchester from New Zealand.

I'm fascinated by Mary Taylor, and earlier this year, we were able to go to New Zealand, Wellington in particular, and visit the site where she was a very successful business lady. Charlotte Brontë actually wrote to her and gave her 10 pounds towards something, and she bought a cow.

But Elizabeth Gaskell needed to get her information as to what had happened when they were school girls. This delay, this long delay in writing and getting a reply, must have been very frustrating, really.

So my gift to Mrs. Gaskell would be any modern device. We've already mentioned

a time travel-type device to send an email to Mary Taylor in Wellington. Instead of waiting three or four months to get a reply to her particular letter, or any letters, it would perhaps take three or four minutes to get a response. I think it's something that's so very easily taken for granted.

So my gift to Elizabeth Gaskell is the wonderful, marvellous invention, device, whatever you like to call it—like, let's get in touch by email, WhatsApp, Facebook, or whatever.

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Marty Ross, [Johnson Society \(Lichfield\)](#)

My Christmas present to Samuel Johnson is homemade gingerbread.

As many of you may know, he suffered from depression for much of his life, genuinely believing that he was the most unworthy man alive and that he would burn in hell for eternity for his sins. We don't exactly know what those sins were, but to us he seems a supremely ethical, gifted and humane man.

As a young man, a family inheritance enabled him to attend Oxford. When he started on his journey from Lichfield, his first school teacher, Dame Oliver, came to see him off and pressed into his hands a gift of gingerbread, saying that he was the best pupil she ever had. Unfortunately, his career at Oxford only lasted about a year, as the money ran out and he was forced to return to Lichfield, to his father's bookshop and a period of terrible depression, before he began to make his way as a young journalist, first in Birmingham and then London.

So I hope my gift of gingerbread might remind him of Dame Oliver and her wonderful words of encouragement. All of

us know of – and I have special reason to be grateful to – teachers who have encouraged us at difficult times of our lives, who have somehow recognised our potential and inspired us with a vision of who we might become.

American gingerbread is quite different from 18<sup>th</sup> century English gingerbread, so I hope Johnson is not too perplexed by mine and enjoys it anyway!

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Mike Kipling, [Kipling Society](#)

The Kipling Society would give Rudyard two presents. The first would be an electric car. Kipling was a pioneer motorist, purchasing his first car, a steam-powered Locomobile, in 1900. He wrote about a fictionalised trip in it in the short story 'Steam Tactics' (1902). A succession of internal combustion engine cars followed, usually from Rolls Royce, one of which can be seen on display today at Bateman's. He wrote other stories where a car was either central or served as a framing device, perhaps most famously the supernatural 'They'. He also wrote a series of poems on a motoring theme collectively known as 'The Muse among the Motors'. Each was a parody of a different style of poetry, from early Chinese, via *Piers Plowman* and Ben Jonson, to RL Stevenson. Kipling also generated his own electricity at *Bateman's*, using the power of the mill race to drive a turbine.

The second present would be a trip into space. Kipling is recognised as a pioneer Sci-fi writer, with ten or so of his short stories usually categorised as such. Perhaps the best known is 'With the Night Mail'. Set in 2000, it describes an overnight journey in a GPO dirigible – propelled by 'Fleury's Ray' - from England to Quebec, the journalist narrator looking

down from 6,000ft at the cities passing beneath. Kipling would get an even better view from orbit and be able to use his own travel-writing expertise to describe it to us all back here on earth. The realism of this 1905 tale belies the fact that the Atlantic was not crossed by an airship until fourteen years later, the crew of the British R34 carrying with them a copy of Kipling's story, which they later autographed and sent to him. Now that would have been a present to savour.

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Libby Joy, [Beatrix Potter Society](#)

None of my three presents for Beatrix Potter is an actual object – in several letters she asks not to be given anything 'big'. Castle Cottage, where she lived after she was married, was small, and she had great difficulty with '*squeezing in*'.

My first is renewal of her Armit Library subscription. She gave the Armit over 300 of her fungi and other natural history artworks, as well as a large number of books, so would be delighted to see it flourishing in Ambleside. However, it has a permanent Beatrix Potter exhibition, and she was notoriously private, so I hope she might be mollified by knowing that it concentrates on mycology, sheep and the Lake District.

Thus, my second would probably get a mixed reception – membership of The Beatrix Potter Society. She would not be happy to know how her life is studied, but the Society's activities would show that she is still remembered and respected for her legacy not only to children's literature but also to science, farming and the National Trust. That would please her, as would its *Reading Beatrix Potter* programme, where the little books are read to children in schools and libraries all over the world.

Anyone who visited the *Beatrix Potter: Drawn to Nature* exhibition at the V&A or one of three American venues will have seen my third present. The final room showcased Potter's farms and her legacy to the Lake District. A wonderful film was projected across the back wall in a permanent loop. The work of Cumbrian photographer and filmmaker Terry Abraham, it featured spectacular scenery – fells, farms, lakes, villages – all accompanied by a soundtrack of birdsong, running water, bleating sheep and shepherds calling to their dogs. Much of this land, now owned by the National Trust and part of the Lake District National Park, originally belonged to Potter. In old age, when she could no longer walk her farms or the fells, experiencing them in film would have been the next best thing, with the amazing drone photography enabling her to see it all from a different perspective – from above.

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### Geraldine Perriam, [Dorothy L. Sayers Society](#)

In 1921, Dorothy Sayers had finished her first novel, *Whose Body?* She was looking for a publisher. She was working, but her salary was insufficient, and her parents – the bank of Mum and Dad – were helping her financially. On 19 December 1921, she wrote this to her mother:

*Dearest Mother,  
During the next three months I shall hope to get some definite offer for Lord Peter. One reason why I'm so keen on Lord Peter is that writing him keeps my mind thoroughly occupied and prevents me from wanting too badly the kind of life I do want, and see no choice of getting.  
With love and apologies for being such a failure, your grateful, Dorothy.*

I thought about what I would give Dorothy at this very point in her life. When she was creating Lord Peter Wimsey, Dorothy was, as she later recalled, particularly hard up. She gave Lord Peter – this is living vicariously, big time – money, a car, and, to quote her letter to her mother, *the kind of life I do want but see no chance, no choice of getting.*

So my present to Dorothy would not be money or instant success, but what every woman should have: a room of her own. And a particular room specified in detail by Dorothy herself:

*Lord Peter's library was one of the most delightful bachelor rooms in London. Its scheme was black and primrose, its walls were lined with rare editions, and its chairs and Chesterfield sofa suggested the embraces of the Hour. In one corner stood a black baby grand, a wood fire leaped on a wide old-fashioned hearth, and the same vases on the chimney piece were filled with ruddy and gold chrysanthemums. To the eyes of the young man who was ushered in from a raw November fog, it seemed not only rare and unattainable, but friendly and familiar, like a colourful and gilded paradise in a medieval painting.*

So that's what I would give Dorothy: I would give her Lord Peter's library room.

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### Seona Ford, [Dorothy L Sayers Society](#)

The Society has collected reminiscences from people who lived in Witham at the same time as Dorothy. Bill Wade, a builder, was asked to go to the house. While inspecting the bathroom Mr Wade noticed a small easel fixed across the bath and asked Dorothy what this was for. She told him that she often had inspirations in

the bath and wrote them down there and then.

Muriel St Clare Byrne, a close friend, remembered that when she stayed with Dorothy she had to wait while Dorothy bathed for a long time. Dorothy had a book rest across the bath and would take her work in with her. Muriel also noted that Dorothy did *The Times* crossword puzzle in her bath.

Finally, this is from Mrs. Salmon, who was a daily help there:

‘When I used to get there in the mornings, she would be having breakfast. Then she used to go into the bath, and then all of a sudden she would think of something, and out she would come.

‘One morning I’ll never forget, I heard such a splish and a splash when I was in the library, dusting the shelves. I gazed in astonishment. She was there in the nude. She was at her typewriter, and all of a sudden, up she got, pushed past me, and back she went into the bath. She was there for another hour.’

Now, having read all that, I felt that the best thing I could possibly give Dorothy would be a really up-to-date bath rack with places for your mobile phone, your tablet or iPad, your mug, little slots for candles, a slot for a wine glass, a place for your soap tray, a side tray with drain holes and a book holder with pegs for books.

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Hilary Temple, [Angela Thirkell Society](#)

We've decided that the most urgent need that Angela Thirkell had was for rum. Not just at Christmas, but all year round. However, a Christmas present of rum would be a good start.

This is for a sad reason, really, because Angela Thirkell suffered from aplastic anaemia. We know about anaemia, of course, but this particularly severe variety is the result of your bone marrow not manufacturing blood cells. And it can creep up and creep up and creep up, and it can weaken you.

Her letters mention various falls, starting ten years before she died, and these may have been the start of the onslaught. The main effect of the anaemia was to make her feel cold the whole time. She lists the devices she uses: a foot warmer, two hot water bottles, a full set of clothes with a dressing gown on top, and a fan heater. That's just to do the writing. I'm guessing going to bed was a relief to her, poor soul.

Admitted to St Thomas's Hospital in London she was given blood transfusions. In the day this was the only treatment that you could have for aplastic anaemia. She reported that they gave her a round red face! But once the hospital had done all they could for her they transferred her to a Surrey nursing home where she was not happy. There's a record in Margot Strickland's biography of her hobbling down to the nearest pub to see if they stocked rum. And, with her luck, they didn't. So she begged everybody who was coming to visit her to smuggle bottles of rum – even a half bottle would do.

Obviously nowadays she could have a plug-in blanket or puffer coat that she could wrap right around herself. But actually, personally, I think rum would be more fun. So I've got some rum cocktails waiting for me to empathise with her later on in the festive season.

And that's our present to our author, Angela Thirkell.

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## Dominic Edwardes, [Trollope Society](#)

If I could give Anthony Trollope a Christmas gift, it would be the Royal Mail. Imagine his delight at receiving the very institution he worked for, loved, and celebrated in his novels.

Trollope spent over 30 years in the Post Office, a career that shaped his life and writing. He played a key role in introducing pillar boxes to the UK, which remain a symbol of British communication. His time in the Post Office not only provided him with a steady income but also inspired many epistolary plots in his novels, as well as depictions of bureaucracy, power struggles, and ambition.

Yet his postal career ended earlier than he had hoped. After years of service, his ambitions were thwarted when he was overlooked for senior promotion. Frustrated by the lack of recognition, he retired at 53, turning his full attention to writing. The sting must have been sharp—knowing he had poured decades into an institution that failed to reward him.

Fast forward to today: the Royal Mail has just been sold to a Czech billionaire for £3.6 billion, marking the first time in its 500-year history that it is no longer entirely British-owned. For a man so committed to public service, what would Trollope think? Likely, he would be appalled—not just by the sale but by the postal system's wider struggles.

Now, imagine Trollope at the helm of the Royal Mail. With his passion for efficiency and innovation, he'd have strong ideas. How about reintroducing twice-daily deliveries? No excuses—letters posted in the morning would be on your doorstep by tea time. The art of letter writing would be revived. Forget texting. As he wrote in *The Bertrams*, 'A pleasant letter I hold to be

the pleasantest thing that this world has to give.'

This Christmas, let's imagine Trollope back in charge—delivering not just letters but a touch of Victorian flair and efficiency. It's the gift he deserves—and perhaps the one the Royal Mail deserves too.

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## Vanessa Heron, [Oscar Wilde Society](#)

I'm the chairman of the Oscar Wilde Society. And from our point of view, Oscar himself said what he would like as a present in his prison letter, *De Profundis*. He said:

*If, after I'm free, a friend of mine gave a feast and did not invite me to it, I should not mind a bit. I can be perfectly happy by myself... with freedom, flowers, books, and the moon. Who could not be perfectly happy?*

So I would give Oscar these things. His books are a special case in point. Oscar had a study in Tite Street, which our members have visited, where he kept his collection of books. There were lots of classical volumes as he had a double first in Greats from Magdalen, and his collection also included poetry, novels, and many first editions inscribed to him by authors. It was a massive collection of books. At the disgracefully run Tite Street bankruptcy sale after Oscar was in prison, Constance and Oscar's furniture, their china, and their other personal possessions were auctioned off – and indeed stolen. People wandered through the house, picking over his things, and lots of items were taken and have never been seen or traced since.

The auction catalogue still exists and includes a large lot of children's toys and a rabbit pouch. So even his children's things were auctioned off. Oscar's books were

bound up into lots of a dozen or so and sold off for a few shillings to souvenir hunters. So, I'd like to buy back some of these and give Oscar back some of his own books. He had books from people like Pater, Ruskin, Swinburne, Rossetti, and many others.

So I would wish everyone freedom, flowers, books, and the moon this Christmas. As Oscar said: *'With those, who could not be perfectly happy?'* Especially books.

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End of the cracking Christmas Cracker 2024 submissions: again, if you want to listen, they are on the ALS website.

**The next event in this Zoom series will be on 10 April on the subject of 'Writers and Food'. See page 28.**

## LitHouses 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference, 22 November 2024

Anita Fernandez Young

The theme of this year's conference was 'International Initiatives: Anything to Declare?'

Marty Smith, our Chairman, and Anita Fernandez Young, our Secretary, attended the conference at Newstead Abbey and Bromley House Library, Nottingham, on a very snowy day. There should have been a further visit on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, to Thrumpton Hall, but this was cancelled because of the weather. The intense cold and travel issues meant that a number of delegates were unable to make it to Newstead, which is near the village of Ravenshead in North Nottinghamshire, but we were hardy souls and we got there to be welcomed by

Simon Brown, the Curator, and Henry Cobbold, the LitHouses organiser.

The main event of the morning was the opportunity for member organisations to provide updates from their literary properties, following the conference theme, and many reported that there had been a fall in visitor numbers from July onwards, with poor summer weather. The Jane Austen House, Knebworth, home of Edward Bulwer Lytton, John Bunyan's house and Lord Byron's home at Newstead Abbey, all reported lower visitor numbers. The Dickens House Museum also reported a fall in visitors, as did Gilbert White's House, but many of the historic properties had found ways to boost their incomes to compensate for this.

Some of the properties reported specific issues they faced, such as the flooding at the Bunyan House and the small size of rooms at the William Cowper and John Newton Museum, which like John Milton's House meant that events were very difficult to stage in the limited spaces. Robert Southey's main site of interest is Keswick Museum rather than his former home at Greta Hall, and Dr Charlotte May expressed the difficulty of representing a 'non-canonical' author but remarked that their online events had not been as well attended as hoped, even with a well-known presenter like the writer Philippa Gregory. The Museum didn't have a garden, so outdoor events were problematic, but walks and tours were being planned.

Several delegates mentioned how successful and valuable it had been for them to recruit younger people as trustees and committee members. This seemed to have worked really well because it gave the younger members a stronger link to the properties and also attracted more young visitors.

The tour of Newstead Abbey led by Simon Brown was very enjoyable: the Christmas decorations had just been completed and the artefacts were beautifully displayed. The shop was splendid. We had tea and useful discussion before setting off through the snowy dusk back to Nottingham to the Bromley House Library, for a talk from Paty Bennett, who manages

the Nottingham City of Literature project. She also talked about the value of getting young people involved in literary life, although the main thrust of the project is to stimulate writing activities. The discussions around supporting our literary heritage were our reason for attending, and they didn't disappoint.

## Some tributes

Timothy Hyman, RA (1946-2024), late President of [The Powys Society](#)

Chris Thomas, Hon. Secretary

Members of the Powys Society were shocked and deeply saddened to learn of the sudden death, in September 2024, of our President, the renowned artist and distinguished writer on art, Timothy Hyman, RA. Many moving tributes to Timothy can be read in our November 2024 Newsletter which is freely accessible from our website ([www.powys-society.org](http://www.powys-society.org)).





Timothy was elected to the RA in 2011. We had last seen Timothy at our annual conference in August 2024 when he seemed in good health. Timothy was a vital presence and energetic force in the life of the Powys Society – he was an elder statesman for our younger members; he was a regular contributor to discussion meetings and came to all our conferences. He joined the Society in its early days in the 1970s and was responsible for transcribing the proceedings of the Powys centenary conference held in 1972 at Churchill College in Cambridge which was published in the first issue of the *Powys Review*, *Spring 1977*. He also addressed members at a meeting to celebrate the founding of the Powys Society held at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge in March 2019.

Timothy could look back on over 50 years of service to the Society in various roles as committee member, Vice Chair, Chair (2010-2021) and President (2021-2024). Timothy was admired for his knowledge of art and literature and especially his critical interpretation and evaluation of the writings of John Cowper Powys in particular Powys's great novel *Weymouth Sands* which in turn inspired and influenced Timothy's own painting and drawing.

Timothy was a great artist, a bold colourist and powerful figurative and narrative painter. His works were often autobiographical and full of humour enlivened by his portrayal of himself in scenes in London. Timothy exhibited at the RA, the Barbican, Austin Desmond, Transition Gallery and in Italy and India. He received many awards and prizes and was artist in residence at Lincoln Cathedral and Maggie's Cancer Caring Centres. He was a brilliant draughtsman. He curated important exhibitions at the Tate (a retrospective of Stanley Spencer), ICA and Hayward galleries.

Timothy was an inspiring educator, enthusiastic lecturer, mentor (he taught at the Slade, Royal College of Art, St. Martin's and in India). He was an incisive critic and a beautiful writer on art who published many reviews in the TLS and was the author of *Sienese Painting*, *Pierre Bonnard* and *The World New Made: Figurative Painting in the Twentieth Century* (an alternative history of 20<sup>th</sup> century art). He was contributing editor of Artscribe magazine in the late 1970s. He was always willing to offer advice and help when needed.

The Royal Drawing School honoured Timothy with a tribute calling him: 'Our dearest friend' and 'A great man'. The past Director of the National Gallery, Sir Charles Saumarez Smith, also paid a tribute to Timothy: 'such a strong-minded, individual artist and writer, someone with such obvious integrity. I hope he will not be forgotten just because he swam against the tide, fighting for what he believed in, independent of fashion.'

A celebration of Timothy's life and work was held on 17 January 2025 at the Royal Academy in the John Madejski Fine Rooms. It was a privilege to know Timothy, to work with him on committee business over many years, and engage in long conversations with him about art, literature and film culture. Timothy was compassionate, critical and very appreciative. He is greatly missed by all who knew him. See examples of Timothy's paintings and drawings on his web site at [timothyhyman.net](http://timothyhyman.net).

## A tree for Linda Curry, [The Clare Society](#)

Marty Ross, ALS Chair

In December an oak was planted by the John Clare Society in memory of Linda Curry, who was chair of The Clare Society for many years, as well as chair of the ALS committee. It was planted at Swaddywell Nature Reserve, just outside Clare's home at Helpston. We hope that eventually a plaque on the oak will commemorate Linda's role in the ALS.



Another oak planted at the same time is dedicated to the memory of Ronald Blythe, the president of The Clare Society for many years, and a friend of Linda. Bob Curry, Linda's husband, has been reading, and highly recommends, the new biography of Ronald Blythe: *Blythe Spirit* by Ian Collins.

I am writing this on 6 January, Twelfth Night, and it is exactly two years since Linda's death. She is still greatly missed.

## Dr Gladys Mary Coles, President of [The Mary Webb Society](#) (1989-2024)

Anne Williams, Secretary

Mary Webb Society members were shocked and saddened to learn of the sudden death of our beloved president, Dr Gladys Mary Coles on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024. This came as a huge shock, and we are finding it hard to come to terms with the loss of this exceptional woman who has been our rock and inspiration for so many years. We have enjoyed her well-researched lectures and marvelled at her ability to delight us with new snippets of information from her many years of diligent research on the life and work of Mary Webb. Her definitive biography, *The Flower of Light*, is and will remain our constant guide. She always managed to find something new and had the ability to deliver her lectures in such engaging

style, rarely using notes. She particularly excelled herself in this special year of the centenary of *Precious Bane*. To say that we will miss her is a huge understatement: it's hard to imagine the Society without her. However, we feel that we must continue to raise awareness and celebrate the work of Mary Webb, and ensure that the Society continues to thrive as Gladys Mary worked so hard to achieve.



Gladys Mary's close friend and fellow writer and lecturer, Aileen La Tourette, sent us this tribute, which was also reproduced in *The Liverpool Echo*:

My dear friend, poet and biographer Gladys Mary Coles, died suddenly on Monday October 7<sup>th</sup>. At 89, her age was a well-kept secret and will surprise many people who experienced her indefatigable energy, wit and verve. Gladys Mary, whose name is carved into the back of Liverpool Central Library on Liverpool's 'Literary Pavement', along with other distinguished poets of the region, published nine books of poetry and a WWI novel, *Clay* (Flambard, 2010). She was an inspiring tutor and mentor who loved her years lecturing at Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Liverpool's Continuing Education department. In 2010 Gladys Mary became Dr. Coles, earning her PhD in Creative Writing at Liverpool John Moores. She continued to give writing workshops at many different venues, including Ness Gardens and Wirral Mind, where she was much loved by Paper Voices poetry group.'

Mike Parker writes, Poet Gladys Mary Coles, 'also the most dedicated keeper of the flame for Mary Webb', wrote a sequence, *Kingdom of Spagnum*, about the Mosses, 'a wilderness between Wales and England'. This sequence appears in *The Echoing Green* (Flambard, 2001) and illustrates Gladys Mary's enduring loyalty and love for Merseyside and Wales. Born in Everton, she spent much of WWII in Wales, which continued to be important to her all her life. *Both Sides of the River, Merseyside in Poetry and Prose* (Headland 1993), compiled and edited by Gladys Mary, illustrates her sweeping knowledge and love of Merseyside, including the Wirral, where she and her family lived for many years.

A painter as well as a writer, Gladys Mary also compiled and published *The Poet's View*, a book of poems based on paintings in Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery. Impossible to convey her uniqueness and warmth – Gladys Mary loved fencing, which she also taught and for which she won medals – and, as I'm not alone in knowing, Dr. Gladys Mary Coles gave the best hugs on the planet.

Gladys Mary's husband, Howard Edger Coles, died of Covid in 2020. She is survived by her daughters, Kathryn and Lyndsay, and her grandson Nathan. [End of *Liverpool Echo* article.]

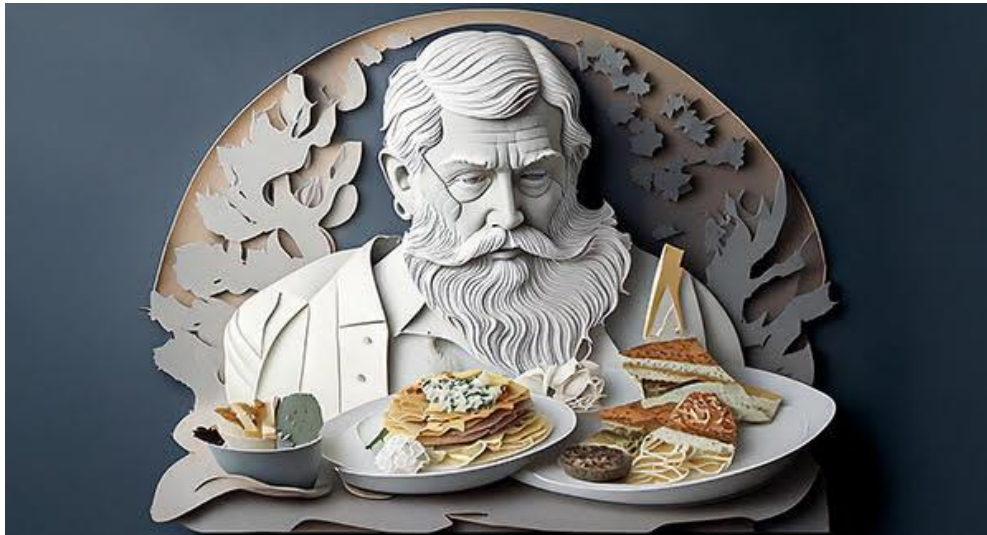
## Writing on Their Stomachs – A Literary Feast:

**7.30pm on Thursday 10 April.**

a mouth-watering Zoom event celebrating the connection between authors and food.

<https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/o4f-SJKcTo6ZYIJotDQNIQ>

Writing on Their Stomachs will bring together participants from member societies to share a three-minute talk on their chosen writer's relationship with food—whether it's their favourite meals, memorable dining scenes, or the role of food in their work.



From Dickens' steaming plum puddings to Austen's tea-time rituals, from Trollope's garden parties with cold chicken and champagne to Woolf's sole with white sauce in *A Room of One's Own*, literature is full of the joys and rituals of eating. Samuel Johnson, never one to hold back at the table, was known for his love of a good meal, once remarking, 'A man seldom thinks with more earnestness of anything than he does of his dinner.'

## FANFARE, PLEASE!

# ANNOUNCING NEW ALS AWARDS

Last summer Vanessa Heron, Chairman of the Oscar Wilde Society, suggested that we should honour the ALS presidents, patrons or other benefactors who do so much for our societies, by awarding an Honorary Fellowship each year at our AGM.

Coincidentally, at our Ransome weekend last May, Peter Willis showed off an award given to him by the ALS for his work in fundraising to restore Ransome's boat, the Nancy Blackett, and in founding the Nancy Blackett Trust. So far as I know, this award is unique. I have not heard of the ALS making another award (please let me know if I am wrong) and I thought it was a brilliant idea to honour the incredible volunteers who keep our societies running.

These ideas have now been discussed by the ALS committee and we would like to propose the following:

- Two honorary fellowships to be awarded annually at the AGM – one for a society member who has made a significant contribution to his or her society; one to a president, patron or other benefactor, for their help in promoting a society.
- The society chair or secretary will nominate their candidates, providing evidence to support the nomination (maximum 500 words). A society may nominate one president/patron and one volunteer. The deadline for nominations will be 1 December.
- The committee will decide on the awards at our February meeting. If one of us is a member of a society which has proposed a candidate, we will excuse ourselves from the vote on that candidate. We will announce the winners in the spring newsletter.
- The first awards will be given at the 2026 AGM weekend, hosted by the Edward Thomas Fellowship. We hope the winners will try to attend in person.
- Finally, we have not decided on an award. Probably a certificate, but perhaps a small token gift as well. If you have any thoughts on this, please let me know.

We sincerely believe that some way of recognising the hard work, creativity, energy, enthusiasm, and love of literature which are so unstintingly (mostly!) given to keep our societies alive is long overdue.

**We'd love to hear any ideas you might have about this award. Please contact me as below.**

Thanks to Vanessa and Peter for lighting the spark.

Marty Ross, chair: [martyross73@gmail.com](mailto:martyross73@gmail.com)

# Alliance of Literary Societies



Dear Members,

At our last committee meeting we discussed the possibility of reinstating the ALS Journal in a new format. This publication would not replace our newsletter but would act as a means of celebrating and promulgating the significant work undertaken by member societies.

I am writing to see whether or not such a journal would be of interest to you and very much welcome your thoughts/responses. In principle, the Journal would comprise of articles already published in individual society's literature, especially significant dates or events. Obviously the permission of the author would be required and the society would be credited. We are grateful to Linda Hart of the Housman Society for this suggestion at last year's AGM.

Do let us know if you think this publication would be welcome.

Contact: [bailes21@btinternet.com](mailto:bailes21@btinternet.com) marked ALS Journal

Susan Bailes, UK Committee member



The Library pub in Oxford's Cowley Road. I have heard it said that if a student arrives at a lecture or tutorial with a suspicious taint of alcohol on their breath their get-out, if accused of having been down the boozer, is to be able to respond with all veracity, 'No, honestly, I've been in The Library!'

## New Member Societies:

**The Book Collector** is a literary journal founded in 1952 by Ian Fleming, the same year that he wrote *Casino Royale*. We publish quarterly and in addition to our articles on all aspects of the writing, publishing and collecting of books, we carry news about booksellers and their catalogues, book reviews, interviews with librarians and obituaries of scholars and collectors. Our archive contains all our work since the beginning. Like our founder, we are as no other. For more details, please see: [www.thebookcollector.co.uk](http://www.thebookcollector.co.uk).

**The Stewartry Literary Society** offers monthly afternoon events in a friendly atmosphere in Broughton House, Kirkcudbright, when published authors and other speakers give talks on a wide variety of literary topics. These range from novels to historical writing, drama, crime and contemporary issues. There are six talks every year and a biennial summer party, all held in Broughton House. For more information: [stewartryliterarysociety.org.uk](http://stewartryliterarysociety.org.uk)

**C P Snow Society** – see page 13

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## You can contact us ...

... at [allianceoflitsocs@gmail.com](mailto:allianceoflitsocs@gmail.com) using (where possible) an appropriate subject heading. This helps to direct your email to the correct person.

Chair: Marty Ross (Johnson Society (Lichfield))

Treasurer: Jeremy Mitchell (Edward Thomas Fellowship)

Secretary: Anita Fernandez Young (Dickens Fellowship)

Newsletter editor: Mark Davies (Lewis Carroll Society)

## Subscriptions

Subscriptions have been held at the same levels for many years and are currently:

1 to 24 members £5  
25 – 99 members £10  
100 to 499 members £15  
500 to 999 members £20  
1,000 + members £25

As of the end of January the ALS had 120 registered members. If you are a treasurer please could you check that your subscription has been paid, or is scheduled. In the meantime, if you are linked to another literary society which is not a member please bring the ALS to the attention of their Chair or Secretary.

***The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual contributors and not necessarily those of the Alliance of Literary Societies.***

## The next issue...

The deadline for copy for the next newsletter is **31 July 2025**, for publication at the beginning of September.

Please send any contributions (500 words maximum, please, generally on subjects which highlight future events or activities open to all ALS members) to: [allianceoflitsocs@gmail.com](mailto:allianceoflitsocs@gmail.com) with the subject header NEWSLETTER.

Attachments should be as a Word document in Arial with your society in the document name and your own name included within the document. Images in jpg format (preferably portrait orientation) are welcomed.