



The Black Country Society

Annual General Meeting Minutes

Date: 9th June 2021

Time: 7.00 pm

Location: Online

The complete video of the Black Country Society Annual General Meeting can be [viewed here](#).

Present:

Malcolm Dick, Andrew Homer, Marlene Watson, Anna Muggeridge, Rose Cook Monk, Barbara French, Keith Hodgkins, Brian Ridout, Tony Ridge, Jack Price, Simon Briercliffe and members of the Society.

1. Welcome from Chair and apologies

Dr Malcolm Dick welcomed members to the very first Zoom AGM held by the Black Country Society and was delighted that so many had been able to join. Malcolm introduced himself and explained that he had been asked to become Chair of this important Society shortly before we went into lockdown. We were unfortunately unable to hold an AGM in 2020 but we have been able to organise a proper AGM now.

Malcolm went through a few Zoom housekeeping points including asking members who did not wish to be recorded to turn their cameras off. Where cameras are left on permission to record has been assumed.

The meeting is in three parts. Firstly, Andrew Lovett, Chief Executive Officer of the Black Country Living Museum, will talk about the really exciting 'Forging Ahead' project. We will then have the AGM proper. Finally, Marlene Watson, our President, will make a humorous presentation in her inimitable style.

Apologies

Judith Watkin, Kathryn Skelson-Reece, Kerry Hadley-Pryce, Barbara French, Dr Ellen McAdam, Anne Turner, James Audley, Aaron Hickman, Ian Bott.

2. Presentation by Andrew Lovett

Malcolm introduced Andrew Lovett, Chief Executive Officer of the Black Country Living Museum, to make a presentation on the future plans for the expansion of the Museum through the 'Forging Ahead' project.

Andrew Lovett's informative and well received presentation can be [viewed here](#).

Malcolm expressed his thanks to Andrew Lovett for an excellent presentation and also to Simon Briercliffe for his contribution.

3. AGM reports from Officers of the Black Country Society

Malcolm introduced the formal part of the Annual General Meeting with reports from the Executive Officers.

The formal section of the AGM can be [viewed here](#).

Chair – Dr Malcolm Dick OBE

I am privileged to serve as Chairman of the Black Country Society. Given that we could not hold our 2020 AGM because of lockdown I am pleased, alongside other members of the committee, to submit myself for election by members for the first time. I am conscious that I am a successor to a number of eminent chairmen, who have left an impact on the Society. I am especially grateful to my immediate predecessor, John Woodhall and Judith Watkin who served as Secretary for very many years, for inviting me to become Chairman in the first instance and for guiding me through the responsibilities and challenges of the role.

I am a teacher and historian. Formerly I taught at Rowley Regis College, and currently I work at the University of Birmingham as Director of the Centre for West Midlands History. I was not born in the Black Country, but in nearby Lichfield, however, I have lived locally in Rowley Regis, for most of my life. I especially want to encourage research into the history and heritage of the region in its different dimensions and increase knowledge of the region both inside and outside the Black Country.

Since becoming Chairman, it has not been possible to meet face-to-face in public, but as a committee we have been conducting business on online. Our focal points are to maintain and enhance the offering to members via our magazine, website and communications, make certain that publications continue to be sold and distributed, and ensure that our finances are in order. We also need to make sure that our membership subscriptions enable us to meet our commitments and our administration is effective and efficient. I am delighted that many committee members – as their reports show – have actively and successfully contributed to the vitality of the BCS in these difficult times.

I am conscious that the success and continued relevance of the BCS depends on many things. It is essential to continue catering for the aspirations of our members and, especially, we must return to a programme of events once lockdown ends. I hope to be able to make some announcements about these at the AGM to include informal entertainment evenings, talks, day schools, walks and book launches. We are also working with other organisations – too many to list in a simple report – to take the aims of the BCS forward. It is vital to encourage research into the history and culture of the Black Country – industry and skills, women's history, dialect and the arts and literature, to name a few. The BCS itself has a rich history and we need to record and preserve our own history. One essential way forward is to increase our membership, particularly by recruiting more young people, women and individuals from the Black Country's diverse communities.

If, over the next few years, I see the Black Country Society broadening its activities and engaging with the present and the future as well as the past, I will feel that we are safeguarding our presence in the twenty-first century.

Secretary's Report – Andrew Homer

When I was offered the role of Secretary to the Black Country Society last year, we were yet to enter lockdowns and experience the virtual shutdown of normal life. It seems a long time ago. It was soon obvious that to keep the Society functioning the decision-making processes of the Committee would need to continue away from face-to-face meetings. I think it is fair to say that the Zoom meeting software was new to most of us as it was to me. Nevertheless, it was decided to pursue Zoom for our meetings despite in the early days, before we purchased a licence, being limited to 40 minutes after our unlimited free trial ended. It was a learning curve for all of us. As we went on more and more Committee members came on board with laptops, iPads, and even mobile phones. I think it is fair to say that due to everyone's efforts the Zoom based Committee meetings have generally been a success.

Early on we decided to make the meetings monthly rather than bi-monthly. Zoom meetings are not perfect and do not suit some Committee members but the fact is there is no travelling involved or rooms to book. I would like to record my thanks to everyone who has supported this new, but necessary, way of working. I am extremely grateful for the help and support of the previous Secretary, Judith Watkin, both as a source of information and for making sure various Society contacts and memberships were transferred to myself.

Early successes included persuading Google to display a more appropriate 'panel' when the Society comes up in Google searches. We are also now listed as a regional society on the British Association for Local History (BALH) website. When we are able to resume face to face meetings for members, we will now be able to update the Dudley Community website with upcoming events.

It has been interesting for me to see the number and variety of questions we get asked through the website 'Enquiries' button. We cannot answer everything of course, but I am pleased to report we have helped some very satisfied people, who hopefully will have gone on to consider membership.

The Covid lockdowns seem to have encouraged people to have a clear out and offer the Society archive material. So much so that we had to make the decision to accept only items relating to the history of the Society itself. We hope that someone will come forward to help catalogue and store this valuable and developing archive relating to the first 50 years of Black Country Society history. In fact, I'm very pleased to report that someone has. So, here's to the next 50 years!

Membership Secretary – Tony Ridge

Membership currently stands at 1,144. In calendar year 2019 we welcomed 56 new members to the Society; in 2020 - 67 new members; and after 4 months of 2021 we have 24 new joiners. All new members are sent a Welcoming Letter, Membership Card and the latest edition of The Blackcountryman. Data Protection requirements are also covered. Each new member is added to our Microsoft Excel Membership Database. Where deaths, resignations and changes of address are notified the database is amended accordingly. The process of keeping the database up to date is vital, particularly as regards ensuring efficient and accurate distribution of the quarterly magazine, and control of subscription payments.

Our membership continues to be drawn largely from the Black Country and surrounds, but we have members all over the UK as well as a sizeable contingent of "exiles" in Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada, Bermuda, France, Switzerland, Germany and the Republic of Ireland.

I am responsible for ensuring that subscriptions are paid, banked and logged on the database. Members will be aware that we appointed new printers at the end of 2019. In a departure from the previous arrangements the printers carry out a comprehensive service of printing, packing, addressing and posting magazines. Because this is an automated system, I am no longer able to insert letters to members whose subscriptions are due or overdue, and I am obliged to make such notifications myself by post or e-mail. Members are advised to check their Spam folders occasionally as this is where Society e-mails could land up.

Finally, I would like to thank all those members who have responded to my requests for an additional donation to help compensate for our inability to hold an AGM last year in which we were to have tabled an increase in subscriptions. The vast majority of members have generously supported the Society in this way. Members have now agreed to an across-the-board increase of £5.00 pa. Those who pay by Bank Standing Order or rolling PayPal payment are politely reminded that they will need to initiate contact with the relevant organisation to increase their annual payment. Thank you.

Editor's Report – Kerry Hadley-Pryce

The magazine has, I think, evolved over the last year, into something that looks more like I wanted it to. I believe that Brian and I work well together, and I value his hard work and ideas in the composition and production of each edition. There has been a mixed, but generally positive response to the changes that we have made, and I think this reflects the importance that members (and non-members) place on the magazine as a signifier of what the Black Country Society is about.

When I took over the role as Editor, I was keen to bring as much of the Black Country 'now' into the feel and the articles, because although we all realise the history of our region is important, it has a thriving and vital present that I wanted to include through, for instance, articles about 'Black Country Creatives'. In short, I wanted to bring the magazine up to date (a bit.) The result has been the inclusion of articles about Black Country arts and creativity intermingled with fascinating articles about 'lost histories' and information about the new and important academic work that is beginning to take place in and about the region. I'm very pleased about this.

As a result of some members' observations regarding errors and omissions, the question of proof-reading arose, and I'm very grateful to Keith Hodgkins for his assistance with this, and believe that Keith, Brian and I now have a good, efficient system to ensure the magazine looks its best.

One of the highlights was when The Black Country Living Museum agreed to take copies of the magazine to sell in their shop. I'm delighted that we have this connection with the museum.

It is notable that the number of articles I receive has begun to dip, despite asking for submissions in my 'Editor's Letter' in every edition. This, I can foresee, will entail a lot more scouting about on my part in the future, but I am in now-and-then conversation with Tony Gray from the Jerome K. Jerome Society and will perhaps pick his brains about further articles so that The Blackcountryman magazine can continue to serve the Society and its members well.

Publisher and Webmaster's Report – Brian Ridout

On reflection, the one thing the pandemic has revealed to us all is the importance of community. I guess we will all be more aware of our neighbours and others living nearby as the virus has swept the nation with much personal devastation.

The 21st Century was appearing to make us all a little more insular and the technological revolution continued to encourage us all to buy the latest gadgets without a thought to how it has been affecting the planet.

COVID, has like both World Wars stopped us all in our tracks and once again given us time to take a look at ourselves and evaluate what is important in life.

The BCS, of course, was started to help preserve a heritage and lifestyle that in itself had created an enormous technical revolution to improve, the living and eventually, the working conditions of people all over the World.

Like all things of merit, the society achieved rapid support and has continued to grow its membership over the past five decades.

There is no doubt the Black Country played a huge part in the first industrial revolution, with many people from all over the World migrating to the area and demonstrating their skills, inventiveness and entrepreneurial approach to business. This has made for an immense archive of documented information as well as stories, tales, sayings and even myths that have extended the reputation of the Black Country over the years.

Generation after generation has recorded and preserved ways of life that we can only just imagine existed in those hard times and continued through two World Wars. The people of the Black Country are not unique, but they are unique to their time and now to their ancestry. This is demonstrated even today in the fact that they created their own dialect, which continues to be used.

As Publisher of the Blackcountryman for the past few years, it has been my pleasure to work with the editor, Kerry Hadley-Pryce to prepare and deliver a high quality, full colour, quarterly magazine which contains stories, articles and features about the Past, Present and Future of this unique area. An area now designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

I have used my previous publishing experience to improve the look, presentation and delivery of the magazine and although COVID has had an effect on our advertising supporters, the generosity of Society members has guaranteed its future in print and online. I am sure that advertisers will return to our publication because it is unique, honest and true to its purpose in bringing history, heritage and entertainment to the Society members and those who purchase it from various outlets around the Midlands.

The Society needs to source many more of the stories preserved in family archives and make sure our page content will also appeal to a younger readership. Grandparents are today relating parts of their lives to their grandchildren, and I am sure for those who are listening, those past times will be fascinating and contribute to their education and understanding of the World. The Society needs to be part of that process in relation to the Black Country.

As Churchill said, 'We live in the presence of history'.

Webmaster's Report – Brian Ridout

Four years ago, I took on the task of redesigning the new website for the Black Country Society. The brief had been given to me by James Morgan (Chairman) and I was very pleased to work with James to create a full colour, multi-page, interactive site which not only told the story of how the Society started but contained information on the history and heritage of the area and at the same time presented up-to-date information on Society News, Talks, Walks and Social Events.

The site is fully searchable and there is an index of magazine 'contents' pages.

Two of the most important areas of the site are the Membership Page and the Gift/Book Shop. These were incorporated with various payment options and although we have had a few glitches, the problems have been resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

Over the years the site has changed quite dramatically with an extended MENU bar and drop-down reference to pages that facilitate access to everything from BC dialect to 'Potted Histories' of famous BC personalities. The latest addition includes pages of brief biographies on BC Women.

In December 2020 I introduced a number of 'Members Only' pages. These are password protected. The password is published in each issue of the magazine and is sent to all members. The pages initially were populated with quiz, word search and links to BC Poets and other BC creative for entertainment during 'lockdown'.

I anticipate the future content of the Members Only pages should include Society Talks, Walks and Events to separate them for the more general information on the site and encourage online viewers of the site to join the society to view this additional content.

I am currently uploading in pdf format every issue of the Blackcountryman magazine from issue 1 in 1967. This will provide all members with access to view and read a copy of any magazine issue they choose. I anticipate the remaining issues I have that need to be scanned and uploaded will take until the end of 2021 to add to the website pages.

Advertising positions in the form of Banners and Display space is available on all pages across the site. We have a small number of current advertisers, but I would suggest that, with a general trend for online purchasing, the society could expand the advertising revenue by encouraging local crafters and businesses to offer their services through the website.

The website was originally designed using templates through the WIX format. This means that there is no computing language to learn, and administrators can upload, update and input information with a little practice.

I can see the site will need to be changed during 2022 as the Members Only Pages are given their own priority. There is therefore a need for additional administrators to work on the site to keep it within the society and affordable.

Treasurer's Report – Aaron Hickman

Treasurer's Report Year Ended 30 June 2020

As in previous years the accounts have been prepared by the Siviter Greenfield Group based in Wall Heath.

The accounts for the year ending June 2020 show a deficit of £1281 down from the 2019 deficit of £8609. A pleasing outcome given the impact Covid had during the last quarter of the financial year.

For a number of years now the Society has been running at a loss. From the beginning of 2018, a group of committee members have been meeting to address the issues we have. As part of our work, we are looking at where we can increase the revenues we receive and all expenses that we incur have been reviewed to ensure we receive the most competitive prices that are available. This work has now started to pay dividends. The quality of 'The Blackcountryman' has not changed but we have been able to secure more favourable terms for printing and postage with increased advertising albeit reduced in quarter 4 due to the emerging Covid pandemic.

Sales of our publications have remained strong given the drop off due to Covid. An updated version of White Shirt, Black Country was launched and proved as informative and popular 2nd time around. A more rigorous process is now in place to ensure that any publications that the Society is involved with have strong forward orders before costs are incurred.

Despite the deficit, the Society retains cash reserves and assets totalling £40,604 which will ensure we can continue for the foreseeable future. The Society is well set to ride out the pandemic with the continued support of its members and contributors.

Malcolm thanked all of the Executive Officers for their hard work in support of the Black Country Society. In particular, he mentioned that Aaron Hickman had agreed to remain as Treasurer over the past year but was now having to step down due to work commitments. Malcolm appealed for anyone with the necessary skills and interest to contact either himself or the Secretary to discuss the role of Treasurer.

Member question

Society member Ward Jones posed a question.

Living in Wiltshire can I say thank you for holding this AGM on Zoom. It means I can join in. I would like to think the Zoom resource is used in the future for talks and/or meetings recorded so that those of us who cannot attend live meetings can watch them.

Malcolm replied that it is something we need to address. Face to face meetings will return but also the use of technology and maybe having hybrid events is important. In theory it is possible for us to have talks online. We will address this, but hybrid events can actually work quite well. Malcolm thanked Ward for raising this question.

Malcolm introduced some members of the Committee to the meeting. Simon Briercliffe is a new member and spoke earlier in answer to a question to Andrew Lovett regarding research. Simon explained that he is a researcher at the Black Country Living Museum and is also in the final stages of writing up a PhD about Wolverhampton in the 19th century.

Malcolm introduced Rose Cook Monk who runs the Duncan Edwards Foundation and Museum in Dudley. The Museum was opened in 2020 just before lockdown when it was closed. The Museum reopened to the public on the 17th of May this year. Up to now there have been about 400 visitors in a short space of time.

Malcolm introduced another new member, Jack Price. Jack has been a committee member for just four months and has a particular interest in Francis Brett Young and his representation of the Black Country in literature. Jack had an article published on Francis Brett Young in the spring edition of *The Blackcountryman* magazine.

Keith Hodgkins is a longstanding member of the Black Country Society and runs the Industrial Archaeology Group. Malcolm referred to the great knowledge and wisdom Keith brings to the Committee. Keith explained that there was no industrial archaeology report for this AGM due to the pandemic. Hopefully, the meetings will start up again in the autumn and we will get back to normal a little later in the year.

Malcolm thanked Graham Beckley who is stepping down from the Committee. Graham ran the bookshop and was also the Society photographer.

David Owen OBE – Patron of the Black Country Society

Looking to the past and the future. David explained that he had passed on many drawings and illustrations to Malcolm from earlier articles and entries in the *Black Country Bugle's* former 'Petticoat Page'. David also referred to Jerome K Jerome and reminded members that he was a 'Walsall lad'. There are many things and people we need to celebrate such as the 100th anniversary of the death of Mary Macarthur. David has given the Black Country Living Museum a copy of the book she wrote.

Looking to the future and the Youth Club in Darlaston, Rubery Owen had apprentices from India and Pakistan. Our current youth club leader is of Pakistani Muslim origin, and someone asked her, 'where are you from?' I'm British she replied!

I'd love to suggest that we have a place where children write articles about the Black Country, their homes, and the lockdown and we could have a competition. Particularly, we want to get our young people writing. It's a generation who suffered over the pandemic.

Malcolm thanked David for his contribution and his ideas. David Owen is a worthy individual to have as our Patron due to the huge amount of work that he has done personally and through the work of the Owen Trust. Malcolm expressed his personal thanks to David as patron.

4. Election of Officers and Committee members

Malcolm outlined the structure of Executive Officers and Committee members.

There is our President, Marlene Watson. This is an honorary post. Marlene will be doing a presentation at the end of the AGM meeting. Malcolm is the Chair and putting himself up for re-election. There is a vacant Vice Chair which we need to fill eventually. There is our Editor Kerry Hadley Price and our Publisher and Webmaster Brian Ridout. The Secretary, Treasurer and Membership Secretary are all leaving. Other people on the Committee are retiring including Graham Beckley and Lawson Hunt. There are other members, some here and some not, who are carrying on.

Malcolm said that he was very keen to have new members on the Committee who can fulfil different roles. Dr Anna Muggeridge is new, and she is taking over from Andrew Homer as Secretary. Jack Price is new and taking over from Tony Ridge as Membership Secretary. Karen Davies is a new member, and she will become the Society Archivist which is something we have needed for a while. Keith Robinson will be joining the Committee and he will be taking over as bookshop manager and will be marketing publications. A very new member who attended his first meeting just recently is Simon Briercliffe.

Malcolm took the opportunity to highly recommend Simon Briercliffe's new book *Forging Ahead* on the history of the Black Country post-World War Two. Andrew Homer, who had the opportunity to see an early copy of the book, agreed that it was a brilliant publication.

Malcolm asked for someone to nominate the Committee as it stands (structure below) and someone to second the nomination.

Black Country Society Officers and Committee Structure

Patron: David Owen OBE

President: Marlene Watson

Chair: Dr Malcolm Dick OBE

Vice Chair: Vacant

Secretary: Dr Anna Muggeridge

Magazine Editor: Kerry Hadley-Price

Publisher and Webmaster: Brian Ridout

Members:

Barbara French

Dave Galley

Ian Bott

Jack Price

Karen Davies

Kathryn Skelson-Reece

Keith Hodgkins

Rose Cook Monk

Simon Briercliffe

Keith Robinson

Rose Cook Monk nominated the Committee as reproduced above and Tony Ridge seconded. Malcolm thanked all current and retiring members for their service to the Society.

5. Any other business

Les and Margaret Millington expressed a vote of thanks to the Committee for their sterling work especially during this difficult period.

Barbara and Richard Beadman thanked everyone for a lovely evening.

In summing up Malcolm thanked everyone for being so patient and for their incredible support. We are a large Society, but we have got to continue to grow. As well continuing what we are doing we have got to look at new ways of taking us forward.

6. The President of the Society

Marlene Watson 'The Black Country Wench'

Marlene ended the evening in her own inimitable style using her wonderful way with words and Black Country humour to provide a finale of entertainment.

Marlene Watson's brilliant presentation can be [viewed here](#).