

**Presidential Address at the AGM of the Association of Independent Libraries, Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, 26th September 2009**

It gives me pleasure to present my Report to the Annual General Meeting for the year 2008 to 2009. Straight away, I want to use this opportunity to say how very grateful AIL is to the begetters of Mechanics Worldwide '09, Peter Ford and Bob Draper, who have produced such a very attractive programme which has resulted in a memorable meeting. The AIL played a small role in being part of the organising committee, though it has been no hardship to come over to this lovely city to eat our sandwiches, flushed down with Bob's endless cups of tea, while having Peter tell us what's what and who's who.

I should explain that in a formal sense, there is not a great deal which I am allowed to say on these occasions. The chairman and AIL committee graciously allow me a few pleasantries and inconsequential remarks, so I shall have to restrict myself to these, or I'll lose my job. In fact, the year has seen little substantial change. Our membership is as it was at the beginning of the year, our funds holding out. We held no special meetings this year, saving our forces for Mechanics Worldwide 09, though I should say that our South-West members held a meeting amongst themselves in July in Exeter. I don't think there is any question of their secession from AIL, but you never know: they are a pretty independently minded lot in Devon and Cornwall.

However, there is one thing that is new, the second edition of the AIL directory, this time in glorious colour. We hope you find the copies you will have received useful. It was Geoffrey Forster who saw this through with remarkable alacrity, discovering images on the internet in places no one else believed existed. As well as its obvious use as a source of e-mail addresses, we intend to utilise it as a marketing tool and as a profile-raising device. The question must be, to whom are we wanting to market and who is monitoring our profile? Not enough people know of our existence, even amongst our own profession, so I would suggest that it ought to go immediately to the head librarians of the six copyright libraries in Britain and Ireland, all of whom will be surprised to learn that we exist, if their PAs and secretaries allow it through the filtering process which all good

CEOs set up for themselves. It might be worthwhile asking our Australian and American colleagues where the directory might usefully be placed in their countries. There is a bit of self-interest here, because I hope that we shall be holding our next Mechanics Worldwide meeting in the United States or Canada, and the directory, if sent to the right people, might help us to gain interest in the right places. I know that we shall be discussing the question of Mechanics Worldwide 2014 on Monday, but it would help if we could turn our minds to the question over the weekend. Just don't let the answer be Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, or any other place you've always wanted to get to, but haven't been able to persuade anyone else to pay your airfare.

In my previous annual reports, I have always tried to say a few words about the locality in which we happen to be meeting. I realise that it would be futile to say anything about Bath and its educational institutions and libraries because for one thing so much about it is known already, and because secondly, Peter and Bob have ensured that we are being provided with professional guides so much more knowledgeable than I could ever be myself. So let me talk about more distant places. Recently, I have been spending quite a bit of time in New England, which is where my wife now works, and it has struck me how many places have names which derive from places in Olde England. Boston has as suburbs Cambridge, Chelsea, Waltham. There are Oxfords in at least 25 states of the US. And, of course, a similar naming of parts goes for Australia as well. So I thought what I would do, would be to try to discover about subscription libraries and mechanics institutes in other Baths. There is an immediate problem, of course. If you try googling 'Bath' even if combined with other words, several million websites are offered up, some of them not altogether savoury. Indeed, in a newspaper report of 10 May 1909, there is a report that this Bath, where we now are, held a beauty parade of girls from other towns from around the world called Bath, including twelve from the United States and two from Canada.

But do not get diverted by beauty parades, persist with your library enquiry, and you will be rewarded. I will just mention three other Baths and their libraries, one in Maine, New

England, another in Ontario, Canada, and the third, Bathurst (not quite Bath, I'm afraid) in New South Wales. Inexplicably, although there are plenty of Baths in America and Canada, Australia doesn't seem to have a single Bath throughout its vast territory (which could explain a thing or two about our Aussie cousins).

Let's start with Bath, Maine. As you know, Maine is the most north-easterly State in America, poking its nose up into Canada. It's a most beautiful place, with mile upon mile of forests and lakes, and it has a small population. Towns are far apart, and it was ideal territory for subscription libraries and mechanics institutes, or lyceums, to be established. Bath, Maine, was founded in 1781 and was named after Bath, Somerset, by the postmaster, Dummer Sewell. The Patten Library Association was founded in 1847 through the generosity of two brothers, George and John Patten, and rooms were rented for it. Around 1889, another benefactor, Galen Moses, gave \$10,000 for a new library building, a stipulation being that the library be free to all Bath citizens. The 1890s building remains today and functions as the town's public library. The town is still a small one, with a population of just over 9000 inhabitants.

Bath, on Lake Ontario, with a current population of 15,000, was founded as Ernestown in 1784 by a group of United Empire Loyalists, who didn't think much of what revolting colonialists were doing down South. In 1819 it changed its name to Bath and in 1859, a mechanics institute was set up in the delightfully named Layer Cake Hall. A library was developed by the mechanics, and Layer Cake Hall still hands out books to the present day.

Bathurst, New South Wales is larger, with a population of over 31,000. It claims to be the oldest inland town in Australia. The Bathurst School of Arts and Mechanics Institute was founded in 1855. Its book collection grew to over 30,000 volumes up to 1956, when most of its stock was transferred to Bathurst City Library. However, the Old School of Arts still exists and it retains 2000 works published between 1760 and 1900. The model is therefore different from the Bath, Maine and Bath, Ontario situations, and I suspect also

different from the bulk of Australia's Schools of Arts, where it appears that most have turned into public lending libraries and even more generally into the social and cultural centres of many towns and villages. This difference is even more in contrast with this country, where the small number of surviving subscription libraries and athenaeums have retained a stock of early books. This is true in only very few of the Australian institutions, Ballarat Mechanics Institute being a prime exception, which I was delighted to visit five years ago during Mechanics Worldwide '04. I wonder whether this difference is because public funding of Schools of Arts in Australia has led inevitably towards popularisation? Richard Wendorf's paper on Thursday indicated that American institutions, where they have survived, are very smart, upmarket affairs.

It would be wrong to think of AIL members as forming a homogeneous group of libraries, and the new AIL directory makes this clear. At one end of the spectrum is the London Library, founded by Thomas Carlyle, situated in gracious St James's Square, with a bookstock of more than one million volumes and a membership of 8,500; while at the other end is Bradford Mechanics Institute Library with its 14,000 books, nine years older than the London Library, and originally established to cater for entirely different kind of subscribers, the working-classes anxious to gain an education. And in contrast to both is tiny Innerpefferay, on the edge of the Scottish Highlands, a parish library which is coming up for its 380th birthday. The fact is, that mechanics institutes, literary and scientific societies, schools of arts, athenaeums, workingmen's institutes, lyceums, and so on, form a broad church which defy simple definition. They can be buoyantly successful, or they can be causes for grave concern. And I now want to turn to one of the problems.

Few here have visited the small and rather remote Australian town of Beechworth in the State of Victoria. I am lucky enough to have done so, and will be talking about its mid-19th century Burke Museum later this afternoon. Very worryingly, its future has been threatened by the town needing to make economies. Jim Lowden can say so much more about this than I can, and I would like to ask him to do so, after I have given my paper this afternoon. I shall be asking the conference to consider sending a petition to relevant

parties in Australia objecting to the dispersal of one of the very few surviving historical museums anywhere in the world which arose from the mechanics institute movement. I do not want Beechworth to depress us too much and I very much hope that it can be saved. But I do want to end by remarking that our movement is more fragile than we would sometimes like to think, and that we must be eternally vigilant to watch out for where cracks and the leaks might be forming.