

## THE BISHOPSGATE INSTITUTE

The City of London can sometimes take on a personality that is almost schizophrenic. On the one hand, the street names and tiny side alleys hark back to centuries past, when the Square Mile played host to traders of an altogether more earthy kind, and when the crowd, not the Bundesbank, could set the prices and terms of business. On the other hand, the incredible technological advances of the past century have forced profound changes on the City. The new, embodied by massive air-conditioned office blocks, architectural extravaganzas such as the Lloyd's building and the NatWest tower, and enormous redevelopment projects such as those at Liverpool Street and Spitalfields Market, has largely swamped the old by its sheer size and volume. It has threatened to suffocate the character that has made the Square Mile what it is. In order to maintain this character, the older and more venerable institutions must be allowed not only to survive but actively to thrive. We need a David to counter the Goliath into which the City has made itself.

It is therefore fitting that this David can be found at 230 Bishopsgate, literally a road's width from the mighty Broadgate complex. But he is not quite the underage upstart of Biblical myth, for the doors of number 230 open up onto an institute which this year celebrates its centenary. During that time the Bishopsgate Institute has encompassed a multitude of roles, be they educational, cultural, recreational or charitable. Of these, one of the most obvious is the service provided by the Reference Library, in which can be found a medium-sized general stock and specialist collections on subjects as diverse as the history and topography of London or the histories of the labour and trade union movements and the co-operative and secularist movements. The building also accommodates one of the Corporation of London's lending libraries.

The budding linguist can learn French, Spanish, Italian or German; the more adventurous can try their hand at Japanese. Two years ago, hundreds of Lithuanian refugees celebrated their country's national day at the Institute. Musicians and audiences alike flock to the Great Hall, which is in constant demand for performances, rehearsals and recording, and the Institute greatly cherishes its long-established links with the City Music Society, the London Philharmonic Choir and the London Symphony Chorus. Yoga and tap dancing are not forgotten, and nor are the handicapped, for

whom there is disabled access on the ground floor, wheelchair lifts and specially designed lavatory facilities.

Let us not neglect the charitable. The Institute runs an Eleemosynary charity which supports local charities, relieves cases of need, hardship or distress, and provides pensions, companionship and other comforts for older people. It is therefore symbolic that the Institute straddles two boroughs, with the eastern end lying in the relatively deprived and, in times past, notorious Tower Hamlets.

The need for the continued success of the Institute is therefore not hard to see, for it has provided for so many a glimpse of something far removed from the daily toil. It is a place to stimulate, to educate, to provide diversity of thought and expression. Visitors often tell the staff that they feel the place seems to belong to them, and perhaps this is as it should be. Since the development of the Goliath at Broadgate, and the consequent influx of people to the area each day, demand in every sphere of activity has soared. But to succeed, the Institute must move with the times, and to move with the times is often costly. The dear old place has served us well, but it simply cannot compete any longer with the demand for space in every sphere and activity.

There is room for improvement in both libraries, which desperately need more shelf space, seating accommodation and storage area, for, in these difficult days, many unemployed people are putting their time to good use by study. The waiting time for exhibitions is now two years and we need another gallery to include sculpture and crafts. The Lord Mayor's Own City of London Scouts and Cubs have to tolerate a very restricted basement, and more space is needed for musicians, auditions, lectures, recordings, charity Christmas card sales, and so on. In particular, we would like to be able to accommodate counselling charities, such as the City and Hackney Alcohol Advisory Service, the Inner City Centre for Psychotherapy, and the local marriage guidance bureau.

Therefore we are hoping to embark on an ambitious but worthwhile building project. This will involve reorganisation and extension rather than a complete redevelopment, since in this way the original character of the place can still be preserved, and the old familiar building expresses so well what the Institute has come to mean. We also hope to recreate the former entrance gates in all their splendour; double-bronzed and crowned with a sunburst decoration, they were removed and sold for scrap during the World War Two, on the grounds that they had rusted up.

This project will reach fruition in the construction not only of a floor of offices but also of a splendid modern conference hall on the top of the rear half of the building. The latter is particularly necessary, since the acoustics of the existing hall are not exactly perfect. Andre Previn once put down his baton in disgust during a rehearsal and refused to carry on, exclaiming:

you can't hear anything. The orchestra can't hear the conductor and he can barely distinguish a violin from a viola.

Although double glazing and refurbishment have improved the acoustics since the great man's tantrum, the sound quality is still by no means perfect.

The project will, in any case, be a fitting way to bring the Institute into its second century, and also perfectly reflects the Institute's motto - *senesco non segnesco* (I grow old, but I do not grow lazy). Early estimates as to the cost indicate that we will need between three and a half and four million pounds, of which we estimate that around half could come from the Institute's existing capital. We ask the support, help and advice of all users and friends to find the other half which will see us through into a second century and a new millennium.

I started this paper with a brief mention of the history and traditions of the City of London. Yet the Bishopsgate Institute has also been through much on the way to its personal milestone, and to launch the appeal without first taking you through some of that history would be somewhat pointless. For the story of the Institute and the Bishopsgate Foundation, of which the Institute is only a part, albeit a large one, is one which is rich in variety, incident and even a touch of romance.

The Foundation was created effectively out of chaos. In the centuries before and after the Industrial Revolution, many wealthy inhabitants of the City parishes bequeathed funds in their wills to any number of local charities. Some endowments were made from humanitarian or charitable instincts, others perhaps to salve uneasy consciences, but the charities remained rightly unconcerned with the motives of their benefactors, and gratefully accepted all donations coming their way. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the number of funds and of trustees had become almost unmanageable. In 1866 the Charity Commissioners for England and Wales reported that:

the endowments of these Foundations have progressively acquired a very large increase of value and there is a corresponding augmentation of the

revenues arising therefrom. On the other hand the proper recipients of many such charities have greatly diminished or even ceased to exist.

It seems that some of these funds were being grossly misappropriated; instead of being used for the benefit of the poor of the parish, reported the Commissioners eleven years later, such funds were being diverted to other objects. The Commissioners added disapprovingly that these objects were often of a "convivial nature", and a Royal Commission was appointed in August 1878 to investigate the situation. It was discovered that conviviality was indeed high on the menu; funds for an annual "Love Feast" to help reconcile people at odds with each other had grown over four centuries from 5/- to £60, but there had been no addition whatsoever to a bequest of £1.6s.8d. for the maintenance of a "godly, virtuous and well-disposed scholar at the University". Whether this was due to the paucity of suitable candidates is not known, although presumably any young hopeful could have invited himself to the "Love Feast" to be reconciled with the fund's trustees.

In any case, the Royal Commission's report led in 1883 to the City of London Parochial Charities Act. Obviously the legislators were as incapable then as they are now of giving any piece of legislation a title which does not involve a twisted tongue. The Act provided for all the parochial charities to be administered by a central body of trustees; all, that is, except the five largest parishes, who were left with the freedom to manage their own endowments. St. Botolph Bishopsgate was one of these five, but, like most of the other parishes, its endowments were largely restricted to providing pensions, clothing and temporary relief for the poor, and repair for the parish church.

This was all to be changed by a man who, even at a distance of some hundred years, was obviously quite a remarkable fellow. The Reverend William Rogers was the rector of St. Botolph and also a great enthusiast for education, which he had decided was the only cure for the low church attendances of the time. So he set himself to the task of transforming his parish from what he termed "costermongia" into one which would school and educate children. To this end, he set up a number of institutions, among them the Golden Lane Schools, which had 900 pupils, and also the Bath Street Schools. His advocacy of secular education in these schools earned him the nickname of "Hang theology Rogers".

But he needed a large proportion of St. Botolph's endowments if he was to carry on his work. He was obviously no stranger to the intricacies and vagaries of the Establishment system, and after much behind-the-scenes

manoeuvring, he succeeded in persuading the Charity Commissioners to draw up a scheme for the administration of the charities. This scheme was approved by Queen Victoria in January 1891, and provided for among other things the erection and maintenance of an institute. To this was added the sum of £40,000 from the central scheme of the City Parochial Foundation (from which, of course, St. Botolph had been excluded) for the provision and equipment of a free library within the Institute.

The foundation stone was laid in May 1893 by Rogers himself at an opening ceremony which must have been quite an event, not least because it coincided with Rogers' 75th birthday. After a lunch at the Mansion House, 500 people attended the ceremony and there were several speeches from luminaries such as Lord Rosebery, the then Prime Minister who formally declared the Institute open, and the Governor of the Bank of England. Rogers himself remarked that it had not been easy to persuade the Commissioners to divert some of the old endowments, such as old women's flannel petticoats, into the provision of a spacious library!

The opening received enormous publicity in the national Press, which seemed to look upon the foundation of the Institute not only as a brave experiment but also virtually an historic occasion. It also made the reputation of its architect, Charles Harrison Townsend, who went on to design the Whitechapel Art Gallery and the Horniman Museum, although some of the vituperation which rained down on Townsend's head because of the design was very similar to the flak Richard Rogers received when he unveiled plans for the Lloyd's building some 75 years later.

But the experiment was by no means universally commended. Blackwoods magazine, reflecting a prevailing attitude that education was no substitute for children earning their bread as soon as possible, said that:

there was an instance the other day of the alienation of a Charitable Trust which is so glaring in its foolishness as to catch the general attention.

The magazine also picked up on Rogers' remarks about flannel petticoats, pointedly saying that:

it is almost incredible that so golden an age can have come to Bishopsgate as that flannel petticoats for poor women are no longer required there. There are moments when not even the most cherished poet in the world can make up for the absence of a flannel petticoat or its equivalent around one's knees. Books may come and books may go, but flannel is a perennial need and it is improbable that any member of the human race

even in the millennium will be able to do without it. And to think that we have done away with that in order that a number of louts may have a nice warm room in which to read the worst novels and the sporting news in the papers and neglect their natural work. It is impossible to imagine a more unpardonable interference with a dead man's will.

I dare say the writer of the article would have turned in his grave to see his beloved flannel replaced by denim and lycra a hundred years hence.

The library in particular proved to be a great and instant success. Long queues were reported for the opening on New Year's Day 1895; 8000 people visited the Library that day, with over 4500 application forms issued to intending borrowers. By the end of the week, over 10,000 people had been registered there. The reading room was strictly segregated with separate entrances for men and women, and a porter to patrol the divide and ensure that never the 'twain should meet.

Interestingly enough, the library was one of the first three in the country to adopt an open access system, and for this it was much criticised in the press and elsewhere. Detractors of the system claimed that it was difficult simply to walk up to the shelves and select a particular book, and added that many books were being stolen. For a while the library installed a closed access system, but in 1946 returned once more to keeping all books on public shelves.

At least library pests were dealt with properly in those days. When James Leverusch was charged in 1904 with mutilating a copy of The Era in the Reading Room, he was given the option of a 20 shilling fine or 14 days in prison. "It is very desirable", said the magistrate, "that a notice of these convictions be posted up so that people know what they are liable to for this sort of thing". The library attendant replied that "we put a notice up about 12 months ago, but no-one read it. The majority of people who come in think they can do what they please", and he was transfixed by a glare from the magistrate, who told him in no uncertain terms: "Then they must be taught differently".

Problems in the library continued apace. One library assistant, John Harrison, was accused in 1913 of being drunk on duty and was allowed to return to work only after signing a pledge of total abstinence. It seems that the fates conspired against poor Harrison; there seems little evidence that the drunkenness charge had any foundation, and it came on top of his dismissal from Bromley Library nine years earlier for the heinous and

unpardonable charge of "having let the fiction issues reach an unacceptably high level"!

The controversy over Harrison's sobriety or otherwise was only one of several incidents in the years before the Great War; the Institute's staff had to deal with, among others, the following: an attempted suicide, who swallowed potassium of cyanide in the corridor; a death in the hall during a dance from a heart attack; infernal rackets from the organ-grinders in the street outside; the taunts and calls from the employees of a local boot-makers who inquired politely of the library users: "Why don't you get yourselves a proper job?"; and the wholly unwelcome attention of the local prostitutes.

Unsurprisingly, the strains imposed by war temporarily altered the character of the Institute. The educational classes were dropped after August 1914 to make way for military activities; these were initially recruiting meetings, but soon the hall was chiefly hosting medical examinations. Parties of war-wounded arrived regularly for entertainment, and the Institute more than earned its wartime sobriquet of "patriotic Bishopsgate".

The interwar years were largely ones of consolidation, although there was no shortage of the unusual. One of the most bizarre incidents involved the Minute Book of the First International Working Men's Association. This volume was part of the labour movement collection in the library, and was celebrated chiefly because it included the first meeting of what was to become Comintern, the Communist International. One of the delegates at this meeting was none other than Highgate Cemetery's most famous resident, Karl Marx. Its value as a historical document was unquestionable, but one of the governors, David Anidjar Romain, saw it as something far more sinister. For Romain this book was nothing less than a blueprint for Red Revolution, if you will pardon my mixing of primary colours, and he insisted that it be banned immediately and incarcerated in the strongroom.

Naturally, the major effect of Romain's order was that library users clamoured to read the volume, and the Institute took advantage of Romain's absence on holiday in 1933 to offer it to the British Museum and be rid of the damn thing. When he returned, Romain was livid, for he was determined that nobody at all should lay eyes on the offending article. He withdrew the offer and locked the book in a safe deposit box at a local bank. It needed intervention from the very top to secure its release. In 1941, Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador in London, requested to see the book in order to make a transcript for the Lenin Library in Moscow. The

request was initially refused by the board of governors, but a letter from none other than Winston Churchill led to a swift change of heart on its part.

Innovation, put on hold during the war against Hitler, returned after 1945. Cuthbert Harrowing, who served as a governor for fifty years until 1981, had won a narrow vote in the 1930s to open the hall to badminton and table-tennis, much to Romain's disgust, who is reported to have snapped: "Let Harrowing have his battledore and shuttlecock, we have more important things to do." Harrowing built on this by founding the Bishopsgate Club, which included not only the aforementioned sports but also the more sedentary pursuits of snooker and old-time dancing. Initial response to the club was overwhelming, and it flourished for 15 years before the lure of television forced it into terminal decline.

Despite its success, it does seem that the Institute had something of an identity problem, at least in the early years. The caretaker, interviewed in 1899, recounted the following:

One ingenuous person entered with a pair of roller-skates in one hand and asked to be directed to the rink. On Saturday a gentleman, carrying a Gladstone bag and with a travelling rug thrown over his arm, rushed up and asked when the train left. But the most disconcerting experience was when a young woman entered and demurely asked: "Is this a matrimonial agency?". Her disappointment was quite saddening when informed that marriages were not performed there.

The problem of identity has long since vanished. As a measure of the Institute's permanence and stability, the Broadgate administration has actually asked for a marker stick to be placed on the Institute's roof against which any movement of the Broadgate buildings can be measured. While the sands may shift around the feet of others, the Institute still remains a rock in many people's lives. Let us hope it can do it in its second century what it has been able to in its first.

J.M.Y.O  
30/11/92