

MINUTES OF STEVENAGE FESTIVAL GENERAL MEETING
7.30PM, FRIDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2015

1. Welcome and Introductions

Those present were:

Ron Walker (Chairman)
Carolyn Williams (Secretary)
Anne Graham (Treasurer)
Rebecca Hughes (Committee, Hertfordshire Music Service)
David Handley (Stevenage Symphony Orchestra)
Ken Moore (Stevenage Churches Together)
Robin Osterley (Stevenage Choral Society)
Chris Ripple (Parnassus)
Paul Ruff (Stevenage Leisure)
Martin Sproat (Committee, Stevenage Choral Society)
Glenn Walker (Committee)

2. Apologies

Hilary Spiers (Committee)
Gill Hutchinson (Committee & Knebworth Players)
Collin Francis (Committee)
Catherine Lomax (Gordon Craig Theatre)
Gemma Hurst (Dance Extravaganza)
Simon Speller
Richard Henry

3. Minutes of Last GM on 1 November 2013

The minutes of the last General Meeting on 1 November 2013 were reviewed and confirmed as a true record of that meeting.

4. Chairman's Report on 2015 Festival

Ron Walker tabled his Chairman's Report which is attached to and forms part of these minutes.

Ron extended his thanks to everyone who had made the Festival possible, including the current committee, the staff of the Gordon Craig (who had been particularly supportive) and all the participating groups.

5. Treasurer's Report

Anne Graham tabled a summary report of the income and expenditure relating to the 2015 Festival. This showed that the Festival had started with reserves of £4186 and was carrying forward reserves of £11402 into 2016. This was an excellent outcome, particularly in comparison with the shortfalls in previous Festivals. As well as ticket sales holding up well (possibly due to investment in social media based advertising), the Festival had been successful in attracting significant grants from local Councillors' locality budgets and particular shows had attracted support from new sources including Barclays, Stevenage Community Trust and Orchestras Live. Hilary

Spiers efforts in securing this funding were much appreciated. Donations had also been received from Lytton Players, Lights Up Theatre Academy and the family of Roger Andrews.

Anne tabled a report showing the income and expenditure broken down by performance. It was noted that the SCS/SSO performance had made a small profit and the final version of the Chairman's report would be amended to reflect this. Shows at the Gordon Craig had kept to their budgets and the theatre's help in keeping costs under control was appreciated. It was noted that changes in the VAT treatment of the theatre's charges would mean an additional cost to the Festival in future years.

The meeting approved the accounts for the period 01/01/13 to 31/10/15.

6. 2016 Mini-Festival for Stevenage 70th Anniversary

It was reported that Stevenage Borough Council (via Councillor Simon Speller) had asked the Festival Committee if it would put on a four day mini-Festival in June 2016 as part of the 70th Anniversary celebrations. It was intended that as many cultural and sports events between June and November 2016 would be badged as Anniversary celebrations.

The dates for the mini-Festival were Wednesday 15 June to Saturday 18 June in the Theatre, with the Pi Gallery available from 31 May until 4 July. It was hoped that Stevenage Churches Together would be able to arrange their usual Songs of Praise on Sunday 19 June. Parnassus also expressed an interest in running their usual performance as part of the mini-Festival.

Current plans for the mini-Festival nights at the theatre were:

- Wed 15th June - Variety Night - groups only participating, not individuals
- Thurs 16th June - Schools Night - primary and secondary (Concert Hall)
- Friday 17th June - Dance Night (Gemma Hurst organising)
- Saturday 18th June - Last Night of the Proms, youth orchestras, bands etc

There was a meeting for anyone interested in finding out more about the 70th birthday celebrations at the Community Arts Centre, Roaring Meg on Thursday 19th November, 5.00 p.m. – 7.00 p.m.

7. 2017 Festival

It was noted that the dates for the 2017 Festival in the Theatre were Saturday 10 June to Saturday 24 June. The booking for the Pi Gallery was from 10 April to 23 July (as a result of the way the gallery bookings were arranged). Fringe events could take place any time in June. The committee would be contacting all the groups later in 2016 to start putting the programme together and would be interested in any ideas.

- It was noted that SCS might be interested in doing a performance in the Concert Hall in order to have space to join forces with another choir. This could be possible if the date was reserved early enough.
- The committee needed to consult with the display arts groups to see how they wished to use the long period available in the Pi Gallery

- It was suggested that a Leisure Groups exhibition organised by Age Concern might run in part of the Pi Gallery booking period (or Springfield House was suggested as an alternative venue for investigation)
- There was some discussion about how the Festival was perceived as rather staid and high-brow with not many events to attract a broader, younger audience (there were lots of young performers, but not audiences). There was a lack of a suitable venue in Stevenage (like Club 85) to support this sort of event as there was a perception that the Theatre was not the place for them. Suggestions included a comedy night; a high profile poet (e.g. Pam Ayres or John Cooper Clark) to join Parnassus; a higher profile for the bands at Stevenage Day (we did try this year but got no information)
- The Festival did now have some funds to invest in bringing some big names to Stevenage, although ideally there should be a clear connection with the town and the event had to be likely to attract an enthusiastic audience. 'An Evening with Shirley Williams' was a possibility. Giles Terera (actor and film maker) was suggested. Lewis Hamilton was also suggested although the chances of attracting his attention for an arts event (or at all) were thought to be slim. Further ideas, and particularly contacts, welcome.

8. Election of Committee and Officers for 2015/17

The following committee was then agreed unopposed for the 2017 Festival:

Ron Walker – Chairman

Carolyn Williams – Secretary

Anne Graham – Treasurer

Hilary Spiers – Fringe manager

Gill Hutchinson - Theatre manager

Rebecca Hughes - Hertfordshire Music Service

Martin Sproat - Publicity manager

Collin Francis - Committee

Glenn Walker - Programme designer

9. A.O.B

It was noted that Parnassus would be celebrating their 40th Anniversary in 2018.

There being no further business, the meeting closed at approximately 9pm.

Stevenage Festival 2015 - Chairman's Report

As the memories of the 2015 Festival fade, we must now reflect on the event to see if we succeeded in our aim to raise the profile of the arts in the town and to give the artists and performers in the town the opportunity to demonstrate their skills.

Thank you for attending this post Festival review and AGM and I hope at the end we can collectively conclude that we did our best within the financial constraints of our limited carry over funds from last time.

Our Gordon Craig programme

Looking at our main program, the dance schools of the town were well represented with three different dance shows though the two weeks. Dancers from 4 to 80 performed on our town's stage.

We had two sell-out shows; one of the above dance shows broke new ground for us with a Sunday matinee with every seat sold and also the Primary school concert had every seat taken - I even gave up my seat to a parent desperate to see their child in the concert hall. Of course there were also tears of pride as all the children played and sang for their various schools. At the end all 375 children came together under the baton of Rebecca and gave their all in the rousing final songs.

The two senior school performances were very good this year demonstrating the highest standards of performance from their talented students. From one of these shows we were able to pick the Roy Mugridge Award winner for this year. Erin sang a song so beautifully it set the standard for the rest of the Festival with her bell like voice, a true highlight.

Knebworth Players put on a courtroom drama which had everyone guessing till Jeffrey Archer's final twist and the end caught everyone by surprise. A very good play which unfortunately did not attract the audience it deserved and the two night show made a loss, although a manageable one.

The Choral Society and the Stevenage Orchestra joined together to present a number of pieces one of which featured renowned cellist Guy Johnston playing Elgar. We were lucky to obtain substantial lottery subsidy for this event via The Arts Council & Orchestras Live. This concert needed to be sponsored as I fear we would not have been able to support it otherwise and thanks to that it looks like we managed to make a modest surplus. These large concerts, although very important in our program, never break even with low audience numbers. Our Jazz band was joined by the National Youth Jazz Band for a joint show, a smaller than expected audience meant that despite bringing a world class orchestra into Stevenage this also unfortunately made a loss on the night.

On a brighter note, this year for the first time Barclay's Bank offered to sponsor one of our shows. They chose a senior schools show and provided matched-funding against ticket sales up to £1000.

This together with the sales on the well supported shows enabled us to do relatively well this year on overall ticket sales. Our attractive brochure, updated website and a social media advertising programme hopefully helped boost awareness of our shows, alongside some excellent editorial support from the Comet newspaper, thanks to new editor John Francis.

The Last Night of the Proms concert, with the usual hats and flags (subject to some last-minute quality control from the committee!) has now become a fixture as the closing show at the Theatre. As with most education based music this was organised by Rebecca and her colleagues at Hertfordshire Music Service, a winning and very hard working team!

Our fringe programme

The main body of the Festival, as always, was based here in the Gordon Craig Theatre. But we also had nearly twenty 'fringe' events around the town coming under the Festival banner. Many of these fringe events were organised by Hilary who chairs the Stevenage Arts Guild. The Festival events showcased the Arts Guild member groups, for it was by and for the Arts Guild that the Festival was originally formed.

For example, the Lytton Players presented six different and varied shows at their home theatre in Vardon Road and the Stevenage Floral Arts Society celebrated their 55th Emerald Anniversary with a brilliant demonstration of arranging in front of a full house joined by the Mayor and Mayoress. Parnassus Poetry, who have been involved with the Festival from the very beginning, provided their usual evening of poetry, music and mayhem here in the Ellen Terry suite.

The 'Art with a Heart' exhibition here in the Pi Gallery showed some stunning work from Stevenage Photographic Society, Stevenage Art Society, the Locomotive and the Underwater photography Societies, joined by Stevenage Floral Arts Society who displayed some beautiful floral pieces. We also have to thank Stevenage Photographic Society for providing photographers for the Gordon Craig events. The results of their efforts are now populating our website and make an excellent record of the spectacular performances on stage.

I understand all the other fringe events were successful and so we were able to spread the Festival around the town.

The last show as always was songs of praise in St Andrews and St George church. It is always inspiring to hear of the good works carried out by so many people who do not look for publicity but simple work quietly for the benefit of those less fortunate in our society. I know that at the last Festival it prompted me to get involved with one of these organisations and I hope it left others moved in the same way. It was also a joy to join in with the uplifting music of the various groups and choirs taking part.

Our people

Again this year we had a theatre apprentice. Josh (from JHN) was under the guiding hand of Gill our stage manager, he had a great and very beneficial time learning the stage craft at the sharp end. We hope to continue this in future years, giving a young person interested in working backstage experience an opportunity for some hands-on experience.

Feedback from our last general meeting indicated that we needed to update and improve the Festival website. I am delighted to say that with a little bit of arm twisting Martin took on the enormous task of redesigning our website and made it suitable for access from the modern electronic handhelds etc. This was a complex process taking over control from the previous hosts and Martin has now become our own webmaster who can respond at a moment's notice to the latest situation. He has now transferred all the show photos to the archives and is working on the next Festival plans. Martin is a member of the choral society and was joined on the committee by Jan as a rep. It was most helpful to have people from our participating groups involved in the organisation of the Festival - the closer we are to the groups, the better we can respond to what they need.

Looking further at publicity, we needed someone with the skills and the wherewithal to do a professional job on producing the Festival brochure. This is a bit of a challenge as new information comes in right up to the printing deadline (and a bit beyond). This task was undertaken by another new part time face in the committee. Glenn took away what we did before and brought it up to date with a different layout and a fresh new look. We were delighted with the final product and that was due to the midnight oil being burnt as the publishing time approached. Well done Glenn and all those who contributed to it.

Very sadly last year, we lost our resident photographer. For as long as the Festival has been running Roger Andrews could be found in the middle of the back row with his camera, supplying fantastic images of the shows. His untimely death was a shock to us all. We wished to mark his contribution and so we have originated a trophy in his name to be awarded to the best photograph in the Festival exhibition. Also with the help of his family we set up a one-man exhibition in the Theatre foyer of just a few of his timeless and outstanding photographs. This exhibition was opened by Roger's sister Teresa who then presented the inaugural trophy to the winning photographer.

To show off his work specifically for the Festival, we also commissioned from Alta Image a long banner in the shape of a film strip featuring his photographs. Because of their long association with Roger and the Festival, Alta Image designed and sponsored this banner. It will be retained on show by the Theatre to remind people of the Festival and also of Roger's wonderful images.

For the most part of the Festival Collin joined our committee helping with publicity and putting together a show on behalf of the Haven. Latterly, he has been very ill and not able to take part as much as he would have wished, I am glad to say he is on the mend and will soon be fighting fit.

Carolyn as always is the backbone of the committee. She has everything at her fingertips and keeps us all pointing in the right direction. She checks all the publicity for accuracy and is able to ensure the committee glide along smoothly, but I know feet are paddling frantically below the surface. We are always obliged to her for the hospitality she offers at committee meeting, and to say nothing of the tea and cakes provided!

I must thank Paul and all the GCT staff, both front of house and the stage crew who helped us to make this Festival such a success. A particular mention to Sue who has almost been part of our team front of house since the Festival inception, we wish her happiness in her retirement after all these years.

All the committee need your hearty thanks for their contribution to make your Festival successful now and in the future. Certainly they have my thanks for the support they have so freely given.

Our money

With our bank balance quite low when we went into this Festival we needed to be very careful at the planning stage and Anne our treasurer, kept a close watch on the budgets. You will see when she makes her presentation that we certainly met our primary objective of not making a loss and in fact our income offset our carefully controlled expenditure significantly, putting us on a firm footing for the future. It's worth noting that even the shows that made us small losses only needed around 30 extra seats to be sold to change this.

We were very well supported by the Councillors of the town with generous donations from their locality budgets. As well as the new Barclays support mentioned earlier, we also welcomed some funding from Stevenage Community Trust, who also supported one of our shows. As we no longer get any direct funding from Stevenage Borough Council in this age of austerity we are delighted to have been able to access funds from alternative sources to support cultural activities.

Our future

Our relatively healthy financial position may allow us to take a few risks for next time, so your ideas on that would be welcome.

You all take part and enjoy your slice of the Festival limelight, but I hope you also attend as an audience. The point of the Festival is cross fertilisation of the groups, you should also be supporting the others by being an audience for their turn in the spotlight.

Thanks to the The Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire who honoured us with her attendance, our other patrons and to all the dignitaries organised by Mayor's team.

I think it can be said that we did indeed succeed in our aim as described in the first paragraph. We are planning a mini Festival for 2016 to celebrate Stevenage's 70th Birthday and dates have already been set for 2017. Let us have your views and ideas on what we should be doing and how you can help. The work starts now.

Ron Walker
Festival Chairman
November 2015