

MINUTES OF STEVENAGE FESTIVAL GENERAL MEETING
7.30PM, FRIDAY 10 NOVEMBER 2017

1. Welcome and Introductions

Those present were:

Ron Walker (Chairman)
Carolyn Williams (Secretary)
Hilary Spiers (Committee & Arts Guild)
Gill Hutchinson (Committee & Knebworth Players)
Christina Luchies (Committee, Hertfordshire Music Service)
Martin Sproat (Committee, Stevenage Choral Society)
Rebecca Hughes (Hertfordshire Music Service)
David Handley (Stevenage Symphony Orchestra)
Gill Brown (Stevenage Choral Society)
Chris Ripple (Parnassus)
Duncan Rutherford (Somewhere 2 Sing)
Simon Brown (Artreach)
Barbara Fleet (Alive & Singing)
Cathy Holgate (Alive & Singing)
Steve Garvin (SMVC)
Myla Arceno (Barrio Fiesta & Philippine Theatre UK)

2. Apologies

Anne Graham (Treasurer)
Glenn Walker (Committee)
Paul Ruff (Stevenage Leisure)
Cllr Simon Speller
Cllr Richard Henry
Cllr Margaret Notley
Michelle Lloyd (Stevenage Library)
Anne Brolly (Stevenage Library)
Tony Burton (Stevenage Writers)
Margaret Brett (Stevenage Floral Art Society)
Jo Ward (Stevenage Museum)
Pippa Gearing (Rock Choir)
Zara Richards (Warriorz)

3. Minutes of Last GM on 6 November 2015

The minutes of the last General Meeting on 6 November 2015 were reviewed and confirmed as a true record of that meeting.

4. Chairman's Report on 2016 Mini-Festival and 2017 Festival

Ron Walker tabled his Chairman's Report which is attached to and forms part of these minutes. The report covered both the 2017 Festival and also an additional mini Festival that had been organised in 2016 at the request of Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) to mark the 70th Anniversary of Stevenage.

It was explained that the way the Festival (a registered charity) operated was that it made a block booking of around a fortnight at the Gordon Craig every two years to allow local amateur groups to put on performances without the financial risk associated with a direct booking of the theatre. This was subject to groups sticking to an agreed budget for performance costs. The Festival paid all costs and kept all revenues for events at the Gordon Craig. The well attended performances (those involving large numbers of young children) therefore might subsidise the less popular ones but this was how a large scale inclusive community event could be achieved. In addition to the Gordon Craig programme there was a 'fringe' of other events during the Festival month that were included in the Festival publicity but were organised directly by various groups and organisations with (normally) no financial involvement of the Festival. The Festival advertised all the events in a high quality programme (c10,000 distributed around the town) and increasingly via its website and social media. In addition to revenue from GCT ticket and programme sales, the Festival also received ad-hoc grant support from a number of local councillors. In recent years it had received no regular grant from SBC (although some support was received in other forms, e.g. use of a free night at the theatre).

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), councillors providing locality budget support and all the participating groups.

5. Treasurer's Report

Anne Graham had been unable to attend the meeting but Ron Walker tabled a summary report of the income and expenditure relating to the 2016 and 2017 Festivals that she had prepared.

2016 Mini-Festival

The one-week mini-Festival had been run on a largely cost-neutral basis thanks to SBC bearing the costs of programme production from the 70th Birthday budget (as the mini-Festival had been at their request). It was noted that funds had been provided by the Festival to support the re-establishment of Rock in the Park as part of Stevenage Day.

2017 Festival

This showed that the 2017 Festival had incurred an operating loss of £4682, having started with reserves of £17042 and carrying forward reserves of £12360 into 2018. £2000 of the loss was due to the use of some of the remaining reserves which were earmarked for Rock in the Park. The Festival had paid for banners and other branding which should help ensure that the event continues to build its profile into the future. The remaining shortfall was due to a combination of lower than expected ticket sales/higher costs on some events and a change in the VAT charging arrangements that had had a greater impact than expected. It was noted that the 2017 Festival had been cut back from a fortnight to ten days because some loss-making shows had been consolidated or dropped (e.g. one secondary schools night instead of two). Prices had been held constant at £9 per ticket across the board.

Festival revenue had included grants from individual councillors' locality budgets and from Stevenage Arts Guild. Hilary Spiers efforts in securing this funding were much appreciated.

The Festival's reserves policy was to have sufficient cash in order to ensure that the Festival could be wound up at any time with all commitments honoured. This was a

figure in the region of £7k, so the Festival was financially sound to continue, although it was important that the 2019 Festival broke even. It was noted that the Festival does have insurance to cover public liability connected with its activities although this does not cover cancellation or commercial losses.

The meeting approved the accounts for the periods 01/10/15 to 31/10/16 and 1/10/16 to 31/10/17.

6. Artreach and Cultural Strategy for Stevenage

Simon Brown of Artreach explained that his organisation had been commissioned by SBC to help develop a cultural strategy for Stevenage, particularly in the light of the plans for Town Centre redevelopment. Although there were some very exciting developments taking place in the town that would build its reputation as a world class science and technology centre, there was a perception to address that the town lacked serious cultural activity. The Festival and its future development was an important element in challenging this perception.

The following points came out in the discussion:

- Some sort of performance space was vital for the Town – the Theatre was much valued. It was however very large, which posed challenges in filling the venue and the addition of a smaller space could be helpful.
- There was no dedicated gallery/exhibition space within the Town which was a constraint on visual arts development
- The Festival did a good job of catering for an audience that was fairly middle aged and middle class. Lots of children and young people were given opportunities to perform, but were rarely in the audience. Some help in identifying and including performances of interest to other groups would be welcome.
- Looking to provision for younger people, there was no equivalent of Hitchin's Club 85 in Stevenage – a venue of the right size and with the right ambience and facilities to support local bands, poetry or other informal performances. The rejuvenation of Rock in the Park as a free event was a good step to catering for this audience and a very important event for Stevenage.
- There was potential to build up the provision of family-oriented events in the Festival fringe, possibly driven by the Museum and Library
- There was some discussion about the fate of the farmhouse in Fairlands Valley which had been the base for a group of Stevenage artists but which was now marked for sale and redevelopment by SBC. Ron Walker explained that he had registered an interest in the property on behalf of the Stevenage arts community to ensure that he was copied in on any information. Although redevelopment might be a reasonable strategy for SBC, given its financial pressures, it should be accompanied by a plan to retain or relocate the provision for the artists.

7. 2017 Festival

It was noted that the dates for the 2019 Festival in the Theatre were Thursday 20 June to Saturday 29 June. The booking for the Pi Gallery was yet to be finalised but would cover the Festival period. Fringe events could take place any time in June. The committee would be contacting all the groups to start putting the programme together and would be interested in any ideas.

- Myla Arceno said that the Philippino community would be very interested in a night at the theatre, ideally Sat 22 June. This would attract supporters from across the country

- The Choral Society/Orchestra were conscious that it was increasingly difficult to fill the GCT for their events so they would be looking, either individually or together, at finding a smaller venue for their Festival performance
- The Festival felt it could only support a single dance evening for 2019 because ticket sales had fallen back for the second event
- Choirs were currently increasing in popularity and there were two new Stevenage choirs (Somewhere 2 Sing and Alive & Singing) that both wanted to participate (in addition to Rock Choir, which wanted one or two nights at the GCT following a sell-out event in 2017 and SCS). The Festival Committee emphasised that performances needed to be able to sell the 400+ tickets required to fill the theatre. It was suggested that perhaps the choirs could join forces to produce a combined event and bring in other performers or childrens' choirs to make a great show and boost audiences.
- It was agreed that further investigation of events to serve the more hard-to-reach audiences was needed. There was also the possibility of attracting grant funding (e.g. from Awards for All) to support this activity. The Committee would look at this in more detail.

8. Election of Committee and Officers for 2017/19

The following committee was then agreed unopposed for the 2019 Festival:

Ron Walker – Chairman

Carolyn Williams – Secretary

Anne Graham – Treasurer

Hilary Spiers – Fringe manager

Gill Hutchinson - Theatre manager

Christina Luchies - Hertfordshire Music Service

Martin Sproat - Webmeister

Glenn Walker - Programme designer

Steve Garvin - Committee

9. A.O.B

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

Chairman's Report

The 2016 and 2017 Stevenage Festivals

My task tonight is to report on both the 2016 and the 2017 Festivals. 2016 was a mini-Festival arranged at the request of the Council to coincide with Stevenage's 70th year celebration and to represent the Arts as part of the town's festivities.

Whereas we usually take a full two weeks in the theatre, the mini festival was only four nights. However we still managed to cover most of the full festival's highlight performances.

A History

Twenty five years ago, I was Chairman of the Photographic club and we, as new members of the Arts Guild, had just moved into our new home base at the Arts Guild Pavilion in Roaring Meg. I had also been invited to join the Arts Guild committee and had filled the vacant place as vice chairman. The Arts Guild was a much smaller organisation back then, consisting only of the choirs, the SSO, the Lytton's and the Artists' Cooperative.

I felt that that this small group did not adequately represent the arts in Stevenage and that the organisation should look to widen its membership to other arts groups in the town. I suggested to the committee that we should organise a weeklong festival where all the existing member groups could perform and by so doing raise the flag of the arts, with a view to recruiting new member groups. Despite many suggesting it would not work, I did have the support of the then treasurer Roy Mugridge. Between us we put together a proposal for such an event and finally it was agreed that the first Festival would take place in the Gordon Craig in October 1994. The rest, as it is said, is history, with the 2017 festival being the 14th in that successive line of these two yearly events.

Rock in the Park

Looking back into history again to 1996, I felt that the festival in the theatre was missing some aspects of Stevenage's musical talent. I wanted to arrange a stage for the many local pop and rock groups of the town to perform for their local fans. That is when Rock in the Park was born! As part of the festival we took over the bandstand in Fairlands Valley and gave local groups the performance space and opportunity that many were missing. Therefore, RITP was in fact a lovechild of the festival and we were able to arrange a total of ten subsequent events over the following years, playing to thousands of the town's people in a wonderful open air setting through till 2007. RITP, as with the main Festival, was originally supported with funds from SBC, but as budgets and regulation tightened, unfortunately 2007 saw the last show in Fairlands Valley.

However, from running these successful events for so many years, RITP had some residual funds in the coffers. The RITP committee were mandated to use the funds to further music in the town, in the spirit of RITP. So in 2015 when it was clear the original RITP was never to return, the residual £4827.70 was transferred to the Stevenage Festival funds. But it was ring-fenced for use in line with the original specific purpose. So in 2016 and as part of the Stevenage 70th celebrations, the festival supported the expansion of a sound stage at Stevenage Day. As previously, and using local bands, we worked with SBC & the Practice Roomz to bring Rock in the Park back to life (albeit in a different park).

We committed to fund that 2016 show with £2000, which helped to bring a big band to the stage and in so doing hopefully pump prime the event to fill the void left by RITP 2007. Bad weather dogged the day but it was seen to work well so we further supported the 2017 Stevenage day with a similar sum, now branded and badged as Rock in the Park. This time the sun shone and a fantastic show was delivered. Well done to all who were involved.

This was such a great success that RITP looks again set to be the great annual event as it used to be, all be it in the different setting but now self-funded, as we now have little of the original money left. I do hope you will agree with our actions and you will see the breakdown of the sub fund in the main accounts.

2017 Festival

For 2017 we had to consider what length of Festival we could realistically support at the Gordon Craig. The 2016 Mini Festival had been a great success and we learnt that we could reduce the number of shows without significantly effecting the bottom line or the quality of the content. Our challenge, as always, is finding shows that will generate a large enough audience to cover the costs of working in a large professional theatre.

It seemed that the festival was becoming very 'dance' orientated with three full dance shows in 2015 as well as the schools and other similar performances. So in the full 2017 festival the dance shows were reduced to just two.

In addition the two senior schools were combined into one, making the overall show more focused and of much higher quality.

For the first time we gave a full night to a local Rock Choir which was a great and well supported night.

In addition two other choirs of a similar type featured in other shows so we hope to continue the trend in future plans. However we must guard against Choir overload!
So here is a rundown of the shows and how successful they were.

2016 70th celebration Mini festival

Dance Extravaganza	-	Made a profit of approx. £2100
Schools Night	-	Made a loss of approx. £1000
Stevenage Celebrates Craig Family!	-	Made a profit of £330 but we were able to invite members of the
Parnassus	-	Made a small loss
Last Night of The Proms	-	Made a profit of £550
Rock in the Park	-	Donation of £2000 (used for big name band)

A very successful mini festival where we could include some of the favourite shows to join in with the town's celebrations.

2017 Full Festival

Primary Schools	-	Made a profit of £750
Rock Choir	-	Made a loss of £220
SCO & SSO	-	Made a loss of £2250
Stevenage Dance Schools	-	Made a loss of £400
Secondary Schools Together	-	Made a profit of £200
Dance Extravaganza	-	Made a profit of £1100
Big Band Sound (HMS)	-	Made a profit of £1080

Knebworth Players	-	Made a loss of £1280
Parnassus	-	Made a loss of £100
Variety Night	-	Made a loss of £240
Rock in the Park	-	Donation of £2000

These figures relate to the theatre takings and total costs for each show. On top of that there are advertising and printing cost etc. incurred by the Festival overall, to be included in the P&L. We do receive some grant income from the Arts Guild which helps offset these overhead costs. In previous years we received some income from the locality grants of local councillors – these were hard to come by in 2017, but we hope to register our interest early for next time.

As you can see overall we lost money on most shows. So we do need to look closely at those making the most loss to see how we can reduce this so we can go forward with funds in hand.

Thanks

Can I thank on your behalf all the committee for their hard work through these last two years and particularly focus on the wonderful programs produced by Glenn which were well designed and easy to read. All the information about the shows was published on our web page so thanks to Martin for the work that goes into that difficult task. Last minute information and changes brought difficulties to both of their lives, but they took them in their stride.

Back stage was the territory of Gill who stayed in the town for the whole festival so she could be on hand when needed. An immense amount of work goes into the organisation which is not seen by the front of house audience. As usual a fantastic job done.

Hillary is in charge of the fringe shows put on by members of the Arts Guild and other groups - again much hard work goes to organising and encouraging the disparate groups that form our arts community. She also liaises on our behalf with Stevenage councillors.

Christina has been working as our schools and music centre coordinator and a wonderful job she made of it, organising the schools and the various bands and orchestras in the music service. Well done for your first full festival. Christina took over from Rebecca Hughes who left the Festival Committee at the end of 2016 after many years of great schools and music service events but has agreed to remain as a patron.

Anne has been keeping track of the accounts and ensuring we pay our bills on time and preparing our accounts which you will be reviewing shortly. She is also one of the judges of the Roy Mugridge award, Anne she is Roy's daughter he would be most proud that she continues where he began all those years ago.

Carolyn is the hub of the festival and ensures all the letters and notes are sent out and oils the wheels of all the other functions so we progress seamlessly forward. However under the surface there is frantic paddling.

So many thanks go to all the above and to all the organisations who work so hard to make the festival the success it is as our two yearly showcase of our local artistic talent. Thanks for coming and we look forward to 2019 which will be the Festival's 25th anniversary! A silver jubilee!

Ron Walker
Chairman, Stevenage Festival