



## HERE'S TO THE NEXT 20 YEARS!

**Writers in Oxford celebrate their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary,  
partying where it all started**

By Marcus Ferrar

Worcester College, a dark November evening, scores of writers gather to make the most of the exhilarating, agonising *métier* which some mad urge has driven them to choose.

That was back in 1992. *Writers in Oxford* was born. 20 years on, some 70 assembled again in the same place to celebrate the anniversary of a society which has thrived ever since, offering a substantial choice of literary talks, readings, excursions and social evenings.

**Philip Pullman**, a founding member, said he felt that he was 1,000 pages into Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, with still more to go. He recalls members being "young and beautiful," a whisky tasting at which the chief taster collapsed on a sofa apparently

dead, quizzes, parties and a short-lived literary *salon*.

"Let's drink to the next 20 years!" Philip called out. "Speak for yourself!" came a retort from the throng.

Another founding member, **Jenyth Worsley**, spoke of endless debates (or "quarrels" as she frankly put it) about what writers and their association are *for*. Thankfully, those discussions continue in full spate. Surely, nobody would ever want a final answer to that question.

**Brian Aldiss** asserted that why we write is "because we've all got a weird bit of ourselves which can only be imparted by writing." We can one day find out what *his* weird bit is by reading his hard-cover, illustrated journals – now on volume 74 and promised to the Bodleian Library.

"I might get kicked out of this illustrious company, because I'm not going to write anything more," he threatened – but promptly recanted.

**Joy Hendry** and **Jane Bingham** were the driving forces behind this rousing celebration, held in Worcester's Linbury Room on 19<sup>th</sup> November.

On the next page, Sara Banerji recounts the early glory days of a society which, at 20 years, is on the verge of adulthood.



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## Writers in Oxford – how it all started

By Sara Banerji (right)

Twenty years ago I got a letter from **William Horwood**, inviting me to a meeting where he planned to set up a society for Oxford writers.

William's stories of enlightened moles had been on the top of the Sunday Times best seller list for weeks, and were a thousand pages long.

I had had two novels published by Victor Gollancz by then and knew the loneliness of being a writer. I looked forward to having, for the first time, the company of other writers and 'talking shop' with them.

There were twelve of us on the first steering committee – **Matthew Kneale, Rebecca Abrahams, Jill Bailey, Shirley du Boulay, Geraldine Lux Flanagan, Jenyth Worsley, Jenny Hawkesworth, Janie Hampton, Philip Pullman, Leslie Collins**, me and William, our founder.

William contacted, via The Society of Authors, all writers with an OX postcode. There were nearly 300 of them. Most of them were there when we met to set up the society at Worcester College.

I was asked to look after **Colin Dexter**. When his turn came to make his speech he read out William's letter inviting him to this event, and pointed out that the letter contained an unforgiveable grammatical error. The Oxford comma had been used incorrectly before 'and' – or something like that.

From then on we held boozy, joyous committee meetings in each other's houses. To this day I have heard *Writers in Oxford* referred to as meetings with Sara and her drunken friends. Not entirely true. I promise!

We created a programme of social events including 'Drinks and Digressions' and topical lunches in the Crypt, no longer in existence.

According to my copy of *The Oxford Writer* 1993, the first seminar was held on August 16th. Linda Newbery talked about her historical novels for teenagers.

Shortly after this I met my editor at Victor Gollancz. She had a desk in an open plan office with about twenty publishing people sitting at their desks around us.

'I hear you have started a writers' society in Oxford,' she said. 'What happens there?'

'It's wonderful,' I told her. 'For the first time all us writers are having a chance to discuss our publishers, our royalties, our editors with each other.'

A huge shudder of horror and dismay went round the room.

We had a revolution after about a year which inadvertently caused us to lose our chairman and founder, William Horwood. The details are too complicated to go into here. Matthew Kneale, whose novel *The English Passengers* a few years later would be shortlisted for the Booker prize and win the Whitbread, joked that anyone would think our revolution was a great political event. The politburo without the limousines, cigars, payouts and champagne, but just as much passion.

Over the years we have had some marvellous events and parties. Shirley and I created monthly literary luncheons, inviting an author, publisher or agent to generate a conversation about some aspect of writing. We held them in The Crypt, then Pizza Express. Every month an issue of *The Oxford Writer* was published, filled with members news, adverts, and interesting and useful articles.

I had two jolly years of chairing *Writers in Oxford*, during which we discussed creating an Oxford literary festival. At the time I was performing at the Cheltenham literary festival which was being run by Humphrey Carpenter. I asked him to help us set up our Oxford festival.

'Oh, it will never work in Oxford,' he said. 'It's OK for Cheltenham where nothing much happens, but here there is too much competition. There's no point in even trying.' Oh my goodness, why did we listen to him?

## Sara Banerji (cont'd)

So what has happened to us all? Janie Hampton has produced, among others, her hugely successful *The Austerity Olympics* and *How the Girl Guides Won the War*. There was a review of Rebecca's second book, *Woman in a Man's World*, in the first edition of *The Oxford Writer* and she has written and published several since. Jenny's poems are frequently performed in Oxford. I have had nine novels published – by V.G., Transworld and Harper Collins. The first six have since been reissued by Bloomsbury. See <http://sarabanerjiblog.wordpress.com/> and [www.sarabanerji.com](http://www.sarabanerji.com) and the Bloomsbury website.



**Merryn Williams** was moved to write a poem after a *WiO* walking tour in the Cotswolds in June. We passed through a tiny village, with a church and a plaque.

### SHORTHAMPTON

That was what killed the village;  
a lot of time has passed.  
I walked up a half-hidden track  
through poppies and long grass.

Tall daisies and a lonely church  
and barn on the hillside.  
One plaque for nine young men, and that  
was why the village died.

No records from a later war;  
stopped short, a family.  
There's sunlight, and more wayside flowers  
than you expect to see.

## From Dorset to Norfolk: a green journey along the Icknield Way

**Hugh Thomson** is no armchair traveller. He has explored some of the world's most remote places and described his adventures in a series of acclaimed travel books. But for his latest project he has taken on a very different challenge. In *The Green Road into the Trees: an Exploration of England*, Hugh approached his native country as if it were foreign, uncovering an ancient culture that turned out to be as mysterious as anything found in deepest Peru.

Hugh's book relates his walk along the Icknield Way – one of Britain's oldest trading routes, trodden for over five thousand years and stretching some 400 miles from Dorset to Norfolk. And it all came to life for us one October evening, when Hugh took us with him on a virtual journey along the green road into the trees. We saw images of sunken lanes, prehistoric forts and standing stones, and heard anecdotes of meetings with farmers, walkers and truth-seekers.

At Avebury, Hugh fell in with a friendly band of pagans celebrating the summer solstice. In the Hertfordshire village of Wallington, he passed George Orwell's house, where the great writer (and walker) struggled to run the village shop. And close to journey's end, in north Norfolk, he marvelled at Seahenge – the Bronze Age timber circle that emerged from the sea on the Norfolk coast in 1998.

In the centre of Seahenge is an upended oak trunk with a tangle of roots – a mysterious structure whose significance has never been entirely explained – and Hugh's book is full of such ancient enigmas. I left the meeting filled with a new resolve to lace up my walking boots and uncover the mystery of my own country.

- **Jane Bingham**

**Stop press:** *WiO* member **Ross King**, originally from Canada, won the 2012 Governor General's Literary Award for English-language non-fiction for *Leonardo and the Last Supper*. The awards panels hailed it as "a combination of brilliant storytelling and superlative writing." Winners in each category receive \$25,000.

**June Knowles, a founder member of *Writers in Oxford*, died at her home in Oxford on 14th October 2012, after a short illness bravely borne. June was a distinguished writer and well known and loved in the group.**

**We remember her with an extract from her book *Cypher Office*:**

### **June Goes For An Interview**

It was just before my eighteenth birthday when I happened on an advertisement in the local paper: "Urgently needed, women to join the Royal Air Force and serve in the Middle East. Must be officer material. Age 25 to 35. Ability to type, quickness with figures, free of all ties." I felt in my pocket where there was still the refusal of my third application to join the WAAFs. Was I officer material? Could I add seven years to my age? The met office has accepted me as three years older than I was but another four? I looked long and hard at myself in the mirror and at my eldest sister Pella carefully. She was twenty-three and I was often mistaken for her. I would give twenty-three a go.

Four weeks later I was summoned to attend an interview at RAF Headquarters in Nairobi. There were one hundred and forty applicants, at the most twenty vacancies. I was not hopeful and with the given age of twenty-three was sent away as being too young. By careful inquiry I discovered the next step was a medical at Eastleigh Airport. I turned up with the others (by now only fifty were left), apologizing that I had lost my piece of paper. The doctor was old, fat and had an expensive complexion.

"You are cutting your wisdom teeth a bit late, Miss Watkins. And what about that murmur in your heart?"

"Just a little trouble years ago," I muttered. "I ride and play squash, even at this altitude."

"Don't murmur, girl, it's bad enough when your heart murmurs. I gather they

need you urgently so I am letting you through, but people in your category have to sign an indemnity paper, that there can be no claim on the service if the condition gets worse. Do you want to go on?"

"Yes." And then because he seemed such a kindly old man I asked: "Why do they want us so much?"

He stared at me a moment, the fat old doctor with a purple nose. It was a kindly face overlaid with sadness. He was not the only man in the autumn of 1941 who feared we were losing the war. Pearl Harbour and the American reaction to it were still in the future.

"When Greece and Crete and Cyprus fell, and in every desert retreat, a batch of cypher officers has gone into the bag. They sent more out from Blighty, and both lots went down in the Atlantic. Now they're recruiting here. Sure you want to go on?" He knew I was lying about my age, but he did not say anything.

Next day I turned up at headquarters bearing my soiled bill of health. There were only about thirty of us; we were all given a twenty-minute test, deciphering with a book code and then typing all capitals very quickly; both had been part of my life for two years. The testing went on for two and a half hours. Long sight enabled me to read the tester's notepad upside down. I noticed I had gained top marks for both tests and also that they had checked us for security and again – thanks to my parents, who had no idea I was taking the test – I had a high rating.

I was full of confidence when I followed on into the interview room at their call of "Next Please". I hoped they would not recognize me now that I was wearing my second sister's clothes. There was no such luck.

"Didn't we tell you not to come back?" the squadron officer asked as I came in.

I moved firmly to the interview chair and sat down. At least I had had time to think of what I should say. Mother used to pick up quotations she liked and overwork them. Now I picked up one of her favourites, ironically straight from Mussolini.

"Youth is a disease from which we all grow better every day!" I said, looking the squadron officer in the eye. I was relieved to see surprise and amusement rather than annoyance.

### **Cypher Office (cont'd)**

Glances were exchanged between the four officers, suppressed smiles, a slight nod. A new form was taken out to be filled in. My health papers were not even examined.

"We'll be in touch in about four weeks. Can you leave your present job by then?"

"Of course." No need to mention that it was a reserved occupation, I was in. I was about to become a WAAF, a member of the RAF, the most glamorous job in my war-stricken world. In high animal spirits I hooted and tooted the horn of my little car eight miles all the way home.

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### **Psycho-analyse your own poem – Stephen Wilson did (it took him one hour)**

For most, it's a struggle to write a half-way decent poem. **Stephen Wilson** went one step further in a talk to *Writers in Oxford* on 30th October. He read one of his, admitted it was not his best, and then held us enthralled for an hour as he psycho-analysed it.

Besides being a poet, Stephen is a trained analyst, so he did a professional job. His poem titled *Confusion* features magpies, nuns, rubbish bins, identity theft, flying attacks, hymns and doves. The magpies are associated with threats, cheating and ill-will. The nuns are black-and-white like the birds. They're erotically evocative and, as he later discovered, they too are sinister.

Nuns embody Christianity, and that put Stephen on the track of an unexpected anxiety driving him to write the poem. He is a Jew, and for centuries Jews have felt undercurrents of anti-Semitism from Christians, in particular Catholics. That's what prompted him to bring the nuns in. To comfort his disquiet, the poem evokes peaceful doves to be found in paintings by Chagall.

Stephen explains that metaphors in poetry help allay subconscious fears. The metaphor has an emotional significance, modulating unconscious roots. Metaphorical wordplay can assuage the anxiety.

"The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, are of imagination all compact," writes Shakespeare. But metaphor, says Stephen, saves the poet from the ego dissolution and the chaotic vulnerability so characteristic of the other two.

See what *you* read into Stephen's poem:

#### *Confusion*

*A pair of magpies leaves the fence,  
like nuns hurrying to mass on a windy day.  
But nuns don't chack like broken gearboxes  
or pick through bin-bags like junkies trying  
to steal your identity. On the other hand  
magpies have been known to warble,  
like nuns singing their hymns.  
I've heard it said, in parts of the antipodes  
nuns are like Hitchcock's birds,  
they can swoop out of a clear sky  
and trephine a man's scalp in no time.  
The farmer who told me this was bald  
and stood a greater risk. He could be wrong.  
If nuns are up there at all, they must be  
less like hags flying on broomsticks  
and more like doves in an early Chagall.*

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### **Maeve Bayton launches a new CD – with some very personal themes**

Maeve has brought out her new CD, **2nd May**. She wrote the lyrics, sings, and plays the guitar and harmonica.

There's a track about a best friend – Friend – and another about her mother – Willow. Others include Missing You and Man from the North Country.



### **Maeve Bayton (cont'd)**

The longest song is *Second of May* – written, she says “about my wonderful husband who died very young. It was in the gestation stage for ages. For this track, I went out into the woods and fields before sunrise and recorded the dawn chorus. This plays throughout the track. There is 25 seconds of birdsong lingering on at the end of the CD. I also took photos.”

Available from [drmaeve@hotmail.com](mailto:drmaeve@hotmail.com) and Truck Store, Cowley Road, price £8.

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## **How to publish two books in one week**

**By Brian Levison**

The number of people whose eyes glaze over when you mention you’ve just written two books on cricket is unfortunately many times greater than those who exclaim ‘That’s brilliant! How can I get hold of them?’

I’ve loved cricket for as long as I can remember. A fervent Hampshire supporter for over sixty years, I played school and club cricket into my thirties. Despite coaching from an England player and hours of practice, I was never as good as I would have liked and peaked at thirteen. My love of cricket never left me and I wrote poems about it, a couple of which were published by **Christopher Martin-Jenkins** in *The Cricketer*, which came in useful 30 years later.

My stroke of luck was knowing **Andy Ward**. Andy was a member of WiO until he left the Oxford area a decade ago. He wrote the best-selling *Cricket’s Strangest Matches* so when Constable & Robinson were looking for someone to put together a 160,000-word anthology, he was the obvious choice. But Andy had just finished *Ward’s Soccerpedia* and no longer wanted to undertake large projects on his own. He asked me to co-author.

We met the publisher in January 2011 in the Ashmolean café. A fee was mentioned which sounded reasonable until it was revealed that it would have to cover the costs of the permissions. Andy’s eyebrows rose. With other projects on the go, he decided not to proceed,

though kindly passed on his preparatory work to me.

I’d read a number of anthologies and thought them all a bit predictable – sections on great batsmen, bowlers and games, with poetry thrown in. Could I come up with something different? Having run East Oxford Farmers’ & Community Market, I was conscious of the work involved. If true for a farmers’ market, it was even truer for a cricket match. So many things have to come together – a ground to play on, players, umpires, scorers, travel arrangements, refreshments, equipment. Then there was the life of cricketers off the field, and how – as in my case – the love of cricket is often rooted in childhood. And, of course, the excitement of the cricket itself, its great games and its greatest players.

The publisher was excited about this approach. The title came to me instantly: *All in a Day’s Play!* No, said the publisher, it had to have ‘cricket’ in it for Google search purposes. So *All in a Day’s Cricket* it became.

There are a lot of books about cricket – 30,000 is one estimate. Fortunately I lived within a ten-minute walk of the place which would have most of them. I went to the Bodleian every day for months. With the help of *A Bibliography of Cricket* by Eric Padwick, who is to cricket books what Dr. Johnson was to dictionaries, I worked my way through over 600 books.

One day I visited the Lord’s Library and got chatting with the person sitting opposite. He turned out to be Derek Barnard, Chair of the Cricket Society, who described himself as a ‘cricketologist.’ I told him I needed a big name for the Foreword. Was **Christopher Martin-Jenkins** – BBC Test Match commentator, journalist, author and currently president of the MCC – big enough? he asked.

There was only a small window before CM-J had to travel to the Middle East to commentate. I sent him the text, mentioning that he had published some poems of mine 30 years previously. *cont’d ...*

## Two books in one week (cont'd)

Charmingly, he said he remembered my name and accepted. He worked fast. We had our 800-word Foreword within a week and it included some very quotable text for the dust jacket. While going over the proofs in January 2012, the phone rang. It was **Andy Ward**. David & Charles had asked him to write a cricket book in their **Amazing & Extraordinary Facts** series. There was a four months' deadline and he didn't have time. Would I be interested?

So that is how I managed to have two books published within 10 days of each other in September. You can find out more on my website [www.brianlevison.com](http://www.brianlevison.com). Now I'm waiting for Andy to phone with some more books he doesn't want to write.



## Teaching journalism in Nepal: a taste of chaos

Every day in Kathmandu there is a power cut lasting at least 6 hours. That wasn't quite what I reckoned with when agreeing to teach journalism there for two weeks in September (*writes Marcus Ferrar*). The first two seminars had to be postponed because of strikes which closed the city down. When I did start, the noise of the emergency generator drowned my words. Half way through, it ran out of fuel, and off went the lights again.

Chaos pervades life in crowded Kathmandu. Many roads are little more than rubble over which cars gingerly pick their way. A 10-year civil war ended six years ago, but the country is still reeling, and the local people have to

cope with the disorder week in and week out.

My assignment was organised by a Swiss foundation – expenses paid, but no fee. I was asked to give a course on the impact of new technology on journalism. A daunting challenge for me, and even more so for my students. After a bit, I resorted to practising 32-word news leads, press conferences and interviewing. That was more to the point and worked fine.

In between, my wife and I did a couple of days trekking, but our guide got us lost! I was not terribly impressed. It felt like my young days as a Reuters correspondent in Africa.

I still made some great personal contacts, not least due to *Writers in Oxford* member **Michele Nayman**, who is a student friend of **Kunda Dixit**, owner and editor of the **Nepal Times**. He showed me an excellent photoreportage his journalists did about people “during and after” the civil war.

It was fine journalism in the cause of understanding. At last something to admire.

## Poetry Reading: Tom Paulin and Leo Ayles

Two well-established poets and a crowded Wadham Room in the King's Arms. Such was the prospect on Thursday, 20th September. We were not disappointed: this was an evening of two halves, each quite distinct.

**Tom Paulin** is a deeply serious poet and not afraid to be outspoken. His collection, **Love's Bonfire**, was published this year by Faber. A major preoccupation is Northern Ireland. He read us sonorous, grave poems full of sharp observation, mordant wit – thought-provoking and often very moving. The room was hushed because not a word could be missed. Deeply satisfying.

**Leo Ayles** is a bold and exuberant poet. As a seasoned performer, he gave us energetic, extrovert poetry. This ranged from **Rhymoceros**, his latest collection for children, to **The Day the Grass Came**, a fiercely committed collection of profundity and passion. This was poetry performance at *cont'd...*

its highest level.

Leo Aylen's poetry is for declamation: Tom Paulin's is for the reflective mind and exists primarily as words on a page. We heard both at their best.

– Dennis Hamley



## Of Oxford Dry and Other Pleasures: Bothy Vineyard tour, 8th September

How much information do you need to enjoy something? Like wine, for example?

We were treated to an immense amount of information by Richard Liwicki, custodian of the Bothy Vineyard, in a large field out near Tubney. We learned about sandy soils, we learned about the dangers of frost and snails and deer, we learned about different grape varieties, we learned the importance of leaves for transpiration. I was rather minded of James May being tutored by Oz Clarke about the intricacies of 'terroir'.

And then we got to taste the stuff, and suddenly it all became real. Here were the subtle varieties of Oxford Dry, Doctor's Bacchus and Renaissance, sipped down in their processing plant, a space scarcely bigger than a generous garage. So that was when we got the feel of who was running all this, and why; which was somehow more meaningful to me than what was done and how.

After which, the experience was crowned with iced lemon poppy cake, lavender shortbread and chocolate brownies, out on the lawn in a burst of late summer sunshine that almost made us think we'd been transported to the vineyards of Provence.

Many thanks to Shen for organising this, to the Liwickis for their generous hospitality to the WiO, and to those good members on the tour who wrote to say it was one of their most enjoyable outings.

– Brenda Stones



Dennis Hamley has reissued his novel *Spirit of the Place*, first published by Scholastic in 1995 and now considerably revised, on Kindle.

Past critiques of the book and its main character: 'Nicholas Fowler is utterly credible as a character ... intriguing, unusual, engrossing ... so convincingly eighteenth-century it takes an accomplished writer to pull that off.' - £2.56

## We welcome 2 new members ...

### Bill Heine

*Specialism:* The Surreal, Sharks and Sin.

*Titles:* Heinsteins of the Airwaves; The Hunting of the Shark.

### David Keen

*Specialism:* conflict studies and emergencies

*Titles:* Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars is More Important than Winning Them; Complex Emergencies; The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan 1983-89.