

Apparently its 40 years ago since West Oxfordshire Arts was first started; memories have become hazy so I will write what I recall. Sadly, its very sketchy, some people, who I can see clearly in my mind's eye, have names I cannot remember but probably others will remember them.

The Association was ~~born~~ the brainchild of Margaret and John Brickhead of Filkins. Margaret, who painted under her maiden name of Ralston, said it was her idea but John, a teacher at Radley College worked out the details. He was unwell at the time and going up and down to London by train for treatment so used the journeys to plan. There were to be ? number of ~~groups~~ ^{panels}, each with its own chairman who could invite others to help.

As far as I remember the Town Hall came free as a wonderful space presumably given by the Parish Council. Of course W.O.A.A. initially had no money. Each panel could organise whatever they liked providing they raised the money themselves and did all the necessary work.

Panel I remember were of Barroton literature. Chair Bob Landray - now of this later.

Photography Chair Yvonne Rosenjard of Broadwell & later Weald.

Pottery Dick and Mary Palmer of Black Bourton.

Music. Christopher Yapp. of Kenot

Drama David and Anne Norrington of Little Ransington

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Painting Margaret Birkhead of Filkins

Crafts hobby Calvert of Aston

You can see why it was called West Oxfordshire Arts Association.

Literature is the panel I know most about and can recall some of its activities. John Birkhead introduced Andrew O'Shaughnessy ^{fun football} a writer and founder member of Private Eye Magazine to join the panel together with Bill Keyser from Aston and Susan Phillips from Bampton. ~~The book club~~ Short story and poetry competitions were organised and produced many entries which, after shortlisting by the panel were sent to our judges who included P. J. Kavanagh and Roald Dahl. They came on the night to present the prizes after commenting on the reasons for their choices. Amazing such illustrious people gave their time freely then.

Brian Winston lived in Muescot then as did Dick Duden-Smith and Susan Dury, both actors at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon. They agreed to do poetry and prose readings and invited their friends to come too. They were wonderful evenings usually in summer and memorably at the Manor ~~House~~, Bampton. The drawing room had french windows leading to an area above steps leading down to an enclosed garden - perfect for readings. Richard Phillips, Annabel Heventon, Roger Lees, Ben Kingsley and many others came on Sundays and together with Dick Duden-Smith and Susan Dury, delighted us. Henry says they were always balmy, sunny evenings!

Sometimes local poets came to read their own work and talk about it, I remember the McNab.

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Another very successful project was the Children's Newspaper organised by Brian Winston. Although it involved a lot of work he brought much expertise and enthusiasm and inspired the children to the ~~Brian Phillips~~ great efforts, even the very young ones. Susan Phillips gave ~~great~~ secretarial assistance and the Enquirers were published very professionally. ~~The~~ I believe copies have recently been lodged at the Bodleian library in Oxford.

Drama David and Anne Norington ran the Norington School in Oxford, Anne was a writer and encouraged to write sketches for Ronnie Barker. They put on very professional reviews and evenings at what was then called the Women's Institute Hall in Banpton, now the Village Hall. The hall had red velvet curtains, always drawn between acts, and one year Ian Ayres, at the start of her career, performed outside the curtains between acts. Hilarious. I also recall Martin and ~~Celia Squires~~ Squires as a tramp on a park bench and Celia Squires coming to sit on the same bench with funny results.

Plays too were performed and involved many actors as well as support staff and of course advertising and selling tickets to cover the costs including hiring the hall. Wine was usually sold at the intervals to help with this.

Were the performances with Rosemary White, the solicitor from Wexford and lots of other talented people whose names I can't remember part of W.O.A.A or did it evolve into the Drama Society?

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Photography. Gunnel Rosegard organised exhibitions at the Town Hall as well as I think outings and venues where members took their cameras. Black and white was then the usual medium and people developed and printed their own photographs.

Gunnel, you know well her about this.

Crafts. Libby Carlvert organised exhibitions including later Rich and Rose which, as it says, only had very special articles which she scoured the area, and the country to find.

Pottery. Nancy Palmer was a skilled potter with her own kiln in Black Bourton. She too organised exhibitions and would help anyone wanting to learn the skill with lessons at her home.

Music. Christopher Yapp can tell you about this as well as the help he gave to other parents.

Painting. Initially this was not the main activity of the Association but was a very popular part. Charles Mussett, art teacher at Radley College and great friend of Haygarth and John Brickhead worked on this panel and much later became chairman of the whole Association.

Having the empty space of the upper floor of the Town Hall was part of the inspiration to begin W.O.A.A. as it gave scope for exhibitions of works by members and others whether painters or sculptors.

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Poetry and Short story competitions were divided into adult + children's sections and some years section had over 200 entries.

The Judges commented on a number of entries and the Winner read out their work.

Literature started a book reading group and also a group meeting at Grange Cottage where people could bring favourite prose and poetry to read aloud. I can still recall Dick Parson reading *Thunder*.

Other people involved at the start of W.O.A.A were many including him and Ian Welch

From The Radleian Magazine 1975

John Birkhead
Radley 1953-1975

John Birkhead, who died on the 6th of April at the tragically early age of 45, taught at Radley from 1953 to 1975. He was born and educated in Yorkshire and completed his national service in the Royal Navy.

In 1953 at the age of 23 he was appointed by Warden Wilkes and began his first teaching post where he remained during the term of office of Warden Milligan and finally worked under Warden Silk.

Throughout his adult life at Radley he was alert, active and interested in every facet of college life. He was always eager to learn as well as teach. He strove to teach craftsmanship to the highest level possible and imbue the student with a sense of creativity and an imaginative approach to every problem undertaken. Skills must run hand in hand with creativity. The botched job was anathema to him. At times he could be maddening to work with, stubborn and demanding and yet a positive energetic source of stimulation.

His early career in close association with Chris Ellis was packed with varied activities including carpentry, sailing, geometric drawing and working in all aspects of drama in the Old Gym. These were very important formative years during which he contributed considerably to the building of the theatre in the Old Gym as well as designing and making the dining room furniture for Common Room. Again he was learning as well as teaching. He learned to design and paint sets, direct lighting and produced an excellent 'Beggar's Opera' in conjunction with Donald Paine and St. Helen's School. It was an ambitious plan which with boundless energy he successfully accomplished. At that period he was inspired by the work he had been doing with Michael Meredith on his production of 'Ross' and had made himself adept at handling any problems that might arise in the theatre, from properties to lighting, while constantly sharpening his creative ability and aesthetic sensibility. In 1966 after thirteen years of living in the mansion he felt restless, gained permission to move out and found a cottage on the Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire border. He was happy there and by 17 he had met and married Margaret Ralston, the only daughter of Brigadier and Mrs. A. G. Ralston, and a talented artist and designer in her own right.

From that time he gained new confidence, energy and a more positive direction. He became a member of the Rural District Council at Witney, Oxfordshire, and successfully served the community on various committees, mainly those in housing and finance. At the same time he worked doggedly to establish the Design Department at Radley which he believed was of greater educational value than the role taken by the workshops previously. This meant the development of an entirely new system of teaching and examining. The department was established with the help of Mr. C. Rowe-Evans of the Oxford Local Examination Board. Once established, he initiated the Independent Schools Design Association and was elected its first president.

He gave Margaret support in creating the West Oxfordshire Arts Association, was its Chairman and helped build the organization to one of some three hundred members during its first two years. He is survived by Margaret together with his two sons Alexander and Sebastian.

Charlie Mussett