

CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

Steady progress since my last report — a series of spring and summer events have come and gone — all successful, well-attended and financially sound. Detailed plans have been laid for the three main events of 2010: the March weekend in Cornwall, in collaboration with The New Hardy Players and with much support from Chris and Sally Searle at The Old Rectory, St Juliot; the Birthday Weekend, which is to be a joint celebration with the Philip Larkin Society of the lives and works of two of the twentieth-century's greatest poets; and the Conference and Festival, at which we are expecting (among others) Sir Andrew Motion, Brian Patten, Claire Tomalin, Christopher Reid, Michael Millgate, Penny Boumelha, Linda Shires, Sophie Gilmartin, Sarah Deere-Jones and Alan Chedzoy.

The presence of postgraduate students at recent conferences has been a great boon, and an essential ingredient if the Society is to remain viable and vibrant into the future. It is a two-way process — the postgraduates have much to gain from attending — and I charge all those reading this to encourage their postgraduate students to book in for the forthcoming conference: details for postgraduates are included elsewhere in this *Journal* (see the 'Call for Papers'). Rebecca Welshman, who attended the 2008 Conference as a Postgraduate, joined the Council of Management as Student representative and as such has been extremely active, recently leading a walk on Portland and about to publish, with Patrick Tolfree and through the Society, a guide to Thomas Hardy and the Jurassic Coast.

The Society is also to publish *The Gibson Memorial Poetry Competition*, a collection of the best thirty-one poems chosen by the adjudicator, Bernard O'Donoghue, from the entries to the 2007/8 competition in memory of Jim Gibson: an exciting and varied little anthology, available shortly from The Hardy Society Office at £3.50 (plus £1 p&p).

On Saturday 28 March, Mike Nixon and I attended, by invitation, a Pagan Festival held at the Corn Exchange in Dorchester. Amongst the many

events at the festival was a poetry competition to elect the first Bard of Caer Dur. For the uninitiated, Caer Dur is the Celtic name for the Gorseth of Dorchester; a Gorseth is an ancient Celtic territorial division which equates to the distance a man can walk in one day. Residence within Caer Dur was a necessary qualification for entry to the competition.

The panel of judges comprised Ash Mandrake, the eleventh and current Bard of Bath, Alistair Chisholm the town crier, Kate Hebditch the mayor, and myself — invited along because one of the requirements was to recite a piece by or about Thomas Hardy. The winning entrant, and now the first Bard of Caer Dur, was a young poet called Lala Johnson; two of her poems appear later in this issue of the *Journal*. We also appointed Peter Rowe, a master from the Thomas Hardy School, as Deputy Bard.

The Friends of Caer Dur, who organized the Festival, plan to make the Bardic Poetry Competition an annual event. Both the Bard and her deputy are keen to work with the Hardy Society, so watch this space!

At the Pagan Festival Jerry Bird, one of the organisers, launched his first book entitled *Landscape of Memory : Living Folklore in England* (Green Magic, Sutton Mallet 2009). It contains much Wessex detail, including a fascinating chapter on Maumbury Rings.

In my last notes, I wrote about the Roman graveyard uncovered off the Bridport Road in the construction of the new Sainsbury's Local. A more recent discovery highlights Hardy's tendency to romanticize the Roman occupation, for at the point where the Roman Road from Dorchester to Weymouth crosses the Ridgeway, excavators working on the relief road have uncovered a mass war grave — a pit containing the decapitated bodies of fifty or more young men, their skulls found in a separate heap. These men are believed to have been members of a Durotrigian tribe butchered in the Roman assault upon their homesteads at nearby Maiden Castle. Strange echoes down the millennia to the continuing barbaric slaughter of young men in Afghanistan? Here we are in tune not with the Hardy of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* but with the octogenarian poet, evolutionary meliorism cast aside:

‘Peace upon earth!’ was said. We sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass
We’ve got as far as poison-gas. (Christmas: 1924)

A major upgrade of the Thomas Hardy Society website is nearing completion; among the changes will be a password-protected members-only section. This will give members the choice, in future, of receiving this journal in electronic rather than paper format. Meanwhile, enjoy this issue of the *Journal*, which contains reports on many recent Society events, and look forward to participating in the full programme planned for the coming year. I will write again in the next THSJ (Spring 2010). Meanwhile keep at touch with us at www.hardysociety.org

TONY FINCHAM

SUBSCRIPTIONS

A further reminder that annual subscriptions are due on 1st April. To save high postal charges no further reminders will be sent. If you have not renewed by 30th June we will assume that you no longer wish to continue membership.

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