

PRESIDENT'S SPEECH

Annual Dinner Coworth Park Ascot 27th October 2016

Lords, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Council and members of Windsor, Eton & District Royal Warrant Holders Association, as your President may I extend a warm welcome and thank all our guests for joining us in making our 206th year one to remember. We are thrilled to enjoy the unique setting of this Georgian house, Coworth Park for the first time for our annual dinner and hope that you may even consider this glorious venue for your family or business events.

Well, what a year it's been. Her Majesty the Queen's 90th birthday year and so many opportunities to celebrate it! The highlight for our Association was to be honoured with a small private audience with Her Majesty who wished to thank us for our gift.

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The Association last year commissioned Adrian Benge of Buttons Saddlery to make a special saddle for Her Majesty The Queen. The gift was endorsed by Terry Pendry, the Queen's Stud Groom and Manager, was bespoke for her new Fell pony 'Taylor Made' and made to the highest quality.

On 3rd June, a small informal group representing the Association were granted permission to present the saddle to Her Majesty in the Royal Mews at Windsor Castle. After a brief visit to the Royal Riding School we were all individually introduced to Her Majesty.

Adrian Benge epitomises exactly what I love about this Association; great skill and quality craftsmanship and a self deprecating modesty about his talent.

I have learned a great deal as your President and am enjoying putting into practise our new Constitution, one of the aims of which is to promote social integration and business networking.

We are honoured by the friendship and very grateful for the support of Sir James Perowne and are consciously strengthening the bond which now exists between the Castle and our local Association. As Governor of Windsor Castle and our honoured guest this evening, he has attended our AGM in April at the Guildhall, my President's Reception at the Windsor Horse Show and kindly hosted our Summer Reception at his and Lady Nicola's their home in the Norman Tower at Windsor Castle. He arranged a wonderful tour of the Library of rare books because of my literary

background and we enjoyed the moat garden and terrace for a sizzling reception party.

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My aim this year has not only been to celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's 90th birthday but also reflect my values of community, communication and charity and of course to convey my love of books. Communication through the newsletter has been widely appreciated and our dear late friend Alan Britten spoke about the RW Charity Fund at our AGM which we will continue to support. In terms of community, we enjoyed a special visit to the unique Eton College Library to see the very first ever printed book in letterpress the Gutenberg Bible, a Koran written in gold, medieval illuminated manuscripts, original Shakespeare plays in folios dating from 1600 and many more book treasures during our special tour of Windsor Castle Library.

Now that library has particular significance to me and my company, Bibliophile. Let me tell you a little story... My late boss, Bill Smith was the doyen of the book trade, a man ahead of his time. He had in his chain of bookshops supermarket style wire baskets by the door to use and kept the shops open late, until 8pm. In fact, my very first and only job has been as a bookseller and I first began as a recent graduate in one of his bookshops just off Trafalgar Square. It was right next door to the Coliseum, the English National Opera House. There I could sell up to 300 copies of Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats a week, long before the musical Cats was in production! Fine ladies in opera cloaks would leave the shop with bag loads of books and we were happy to indulge their reading habits.

Now, our Bill Smith decided to publish a rather saucy collection of erotic watercolour paintings by the great Georgian cartoonist and satirist Thomas Rowlandson. The trouble began when all 30,000 copies were impounded by the good customs officer at the port of Southampton under the Obscene Publications Act! It was probably the last book to have been banned in this country! Well, our Bill was having none of this. Rowlandson was a national treasure and this body of work was part of our national heritage, so Bill hired the art critic Edward Lucie-Smith to research the origins of the supposedly offensive watercolours. In only turned out that the original watercolours were held at the Queen's Private Library at Windsor Castle! Armed with his research, Bill had his day in court. In the dock, he tucks his thumbs under his imaginary braces and turns to the Judge, and in summary declared, "Well, me Lud, if they're good enough for Her Majesty, surely they're good enough for her subjects!"

The court erupted in laughter, the gravel went down and the case was thrown out! Victory for Bill and Bibliophile. We had a bestseller on our hands thanks to loads of publicity in the London Evening Standard and I like to think that this is how His

Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh was made aware of our rather eclectic bookselling service and become a customer. And so he has been for around 25 years. I am honoured to be a Royal Warrant Grantee and to maintain the service and quality we all here expect in our businesses. The Duke of Edinburgh has only granted 12 Warrants and I have the last one to be conferred, which makes it a rare accolade indeed. We are members of a very exclusive club, lords, ladies and gentlemen. Within the framework of the new constitution we are now able to uphold the values and quality of service granted by the Royal Household and to promote a wider understanding of the values of the Association and its potential to contribute to and educate the community, encouraging and supporting the development of crafts, apprenticeships and skills.

In April I attended Sandringham RWH weekend Tour of Constable Country and their Annual Dinner. May was a particularly busy month and started in Aberdeen at the local RWH AGM and Annual Dinner and a glorious tour of the Lochnagar Distillery. This was immediately followed by my President's Reception at the Royal Windsor Horse Show on the National Association's Pavilion and the wonderful opportunity to attend the Queen's Gala concert in the evening. I very much enjoyed the tour of Highgrove gardens and lunch organized by the local RWH association. Many enjoyed the exciting Steam Engine weekend at Fawley Hall, Henley, which was hosted by Sir William and Lady McAlpine. There were some 80 steam engines, funfair, vintage cars and much more on show as well as rides on Bill's own private railway line and museum. Remember, this was the gentleman who bought and saved the Flying Scotsman steam engine! Finally, we were honoured to attend the Buckingham Palace Garden Party on the 24th May.

As an Association, we continue to grow, attract and welcome new members and with our programme of forthcoming events this shall not cease. I have met and continue to meet the most creative and entertaining people and made some great friends within this short period of office.

Former Royal Warrant Holders whose grants may have lapsed are still most welcome to remain part of the extended community. Their wealth of experience and invaluable input is always appreciated and respected and it is only from such loyal founding members that the younger generation can learn.

Christopher Ashton-Jones once mentioned he had researched my website about me and found the following quote:

"I am often asked two questions, "What makes a book sell and what are your bestsellers"?"

In brief, it is beautifully made art books, conspiracy theories, crime fiction and by genre, it is predominantly non-fiction - art, history, religion, war, humour and erotica. Not necessarily in that order!

Signed books are collectable items I love to sell, so I regularly organise author visits. One of my author friends had very kindly stepped in to be our guest speaker tonight, Mr Robin Bayley. Inspiration is our theme for all our speakers tonight. Think "I didn't get where I am today without..."

In my case, it is most definitely Bill Smith who arranged when he was dying of cancer that I could buy the business from his widow so I became sole owner at the age of just 27 of the newspaper Bibliophile and the mail order operation. I grew the business to four times the size in the first year. Bill put all his faith in me to look after his widow for the rest of her natural life, which I did. There had been no fixed price set on the business. It was a gamble and I turned to all 10 staff and said, "Look we're all on the dole tomorrow or I stick my neck out and buy this company. Are you with me?" They all were, and 10 staff are still with me some 20 years later!

My other main inspiration is the author Dr. Aileen Armitage. If you have heard the rumours, they're all true, yes she is my mother. She was to be our guest speaker tonight but has sent her apologies. She is in great pain and the anticipated hip replacement operation she was waiting for has been offered sooner than expected. She has sent this note:

READ

Please forgive her and enjoy our valiant stand-in-at short-notice speaker, the handsome author, Robin Bayley. He has an inspiring tale to tell of a double life led in South America and his own quest of discovery.

So my background is one of a thoroughbred bookseller; I was "born in a book" my husband says. My mother Aileen Armitage has written and had published 34 historical novels and crime fiction despite her disability of being blind. She was made Woman of the Year in 1989 for her achievements.

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Because my two older brothers had very poor eyesight and are now blind from a hereditary eye condition and also and my sister had pretty ropy eyesight, as the sighted child my duties weren't washing up but reading out loud my mum's manuscripts she had written long hand in huge felt tip pen. In this way I learned the craft of writing and to edit from a very young age out of necessity. Even today, we are still publishing my mother's back list of titles in digital format through Bibliophile.

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My mother inspired me because even blindness was no barrier to her success. When I was aged around 5, we would travel into Liverpool by bus to BBC Radio to broadcast her short stories live on air. Her writer's circle included Liver Birds writers like Carla Lane and she has attended every year for 40 years almost without fail Swanwick Writers Summer School where only last year she as guest speaker was inspiring young authors with her stories. It was there that she was interviewed by BBC local radio and met and fell in love with the man who was later to become her second husband and my step-father, Deric Longden. He has been a comedy writer for the likes of Les Dawson and together they became a formidable writing duo.

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My friend Terry Jones of Monty Python always introduced me to people as the only person he knows who has had not one, but *two* films made about their family!

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Diana's Story, published in 1989, some years after Deric's first wife Diana's death, was a bestseller. The book hit the Sunday Times best seller list straight away, and won the NCR book award. BBC Radio 4 voted it the most popular ever book read aloud and it was read by Deric himself. The book was followed by Lost for Words, The Cat Who Came in from the Cold, I'm a Stranger Here Myself, Enough to Make a Cat Laugh and A Play On Words. Deric first two books were adapted for television under the title [Wide-Eyed and Legless](#), and an adaptation of Lost for Words. Both were nominated for multiple BAFTAs and [Lost For Words](#), screened in January 1999, attracted an audience of more than 12 million viewers and won the Emmy for best foreign drama and the only BAFTA for Dame Thora Hird as Best Actress.

My mother inspired Deric to write about his life and they both have inspired me into a life in books and publishing.

I may not know all my 100,000 customers, but they know me and my life story, my literary background and success through hard work and dedication. I think many of us can look back and recall “I didn’t get where I am today without...” and think of those who helped mould and inspire us, people, circumstances and opportunities we have experienced.

After our guest speaker tonight we have a surprise GHOST speaker! Yes, from beyond the grave, the voice of our dearly departed Deric Londgen regaling us with a couple of his very popular after-dinner humorous stories. Sit back and enjoy...

Without further reflection, may I praise the fine dining and superlative service we are all enjoying here at Coworth Park tonight.

I wish to thank Bendicks chocolates for kindly providing each of us with a box of chocolates to take home and also in your table gift is either a coffee table photography book on Windsor and the great park or an antique map of the area, donated by Bibliophile Books.

Please join me as we raise our glasses in a toast to Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh.

Thank you so much for listening.