

## Somerset Guild of Design and Craftsmanship Limited



Directors report to the AGM on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2010

Given by the Master, David M Brown

I am presenting this report, and my previous one, in the way that it has been done in the past – by a document read out at the meeting. I shall, with the Board's approval, try and get them produced well in advance of the meeting so that they can go out with the notices for the AGM. That would then free up time at the meeting and allow more time for discussion and possibly think of other ways of approaching the AGM occasion.

The Courthouse Management group has met 9 times since the last AGM. I would like to thank them for the time they have put into this, not only round the meeting table, but also in between meetings where quite a lot of the action takes place.

Thanks to Derek Richards, our web site continues to get a high number of hits – averaging well over 1000 hits per month as well as almost four thousand page downloads. Derek is always in need of high quality images to adorn the web pages, and has added a pdf section so that we can publish longer documents such as the Journal on the web. He also sees to all sorts of maintenance jobs and signage around the Gallery, such as the new OPEN sign. Thanks to Lesley Fawcett who manages to make sense of our sometimes inconclusive discussions and presents them with unfailing clarity in the minutes. Thanks to Trish Burrige who gives us the benefit of her no-nonsense experience. To Dave Appleby who keeps an eagle eye on the flow of funds in the Gallery – not an easy task, but one that he manages with gentle efficiency. And thanks to Ruth Logan – I am sure we all appreciate just how much the whole operation of the Gallery depends on Ruth – her ability to keep calm when makers descend on her with stock changeovers; her way of charming the customers; her way with words in the many advertisements that she prepares, and above all her great eye for setting out the Gallery displays and exhibitions to such great acclaim. We frequently have visitors saying how impressed they are with the Gallery – preferring it to many others that they visit. We are truly grateful for all her efforts. She cannot work 6 days per week non-stop, however, so the smooth running of the gallery has to depend on the voluntary help of others. We really appreciate the time given up by volunteers for this – Shelagh Barratt-James who does most of Mondays in term time, and a small but noble band of members who fill the gaps in the rota. We could always do with more volunteers, so please consider spending even just one day, or half a day a month behind the counter. It's not difficult – in fact it's quite enjoyable – and you do get to meet a wide variety of people. Please make a point of seeing Ruth to learn what it involves.

We have tried over the last few years to set up a Friends group from which in due course further help for the Gallery may flow. Instrumental in getting this group ticking have been Ruth (again) and Jenny Brown. Their first newsletter has been published. Numbers are increasing, to the extent that on Thursday November 25<sup>th</sup> they are hoping to have their own evening reception in the Gallery. Thank you, Jen and Ruth, for pushing this on.

Behind the scenes is another person of great importance. Towards the end of 2009 Jane Osborne took over account handling functions that had previously been done by Ruth and Steve Vellacott. Very soon she realised that what we had all thought would be a simple changeover turned out to be the very opposite because the software being used was very different from the Sage system with which Jane is very familiar. It has taken a while for the system to settle down, and I would like to thank Jane on your behalf for being so patient and uncomplaining about it. The aim is always to get makers payments out as soon as possible in the month following the sale of any item. Sometimes the cash flow makes that difficult, and I ask for your understanding on this. She cannot pay out money that is not in the account – and Dave Appleby is forever trying to build up sufficient reserves to avoid having to pay last month's bills with this month's takings. He still needs that financial cushion that I mentioned in my remarks last year.

Speaking of which, you may be wondering how my intended sponsored walk of the boundary of Somerset has gone – it hasn't – yet. I have done some research, got some maps together, and have discovered – as you could no doubt have told me - that the path to be taken will have to be a close approximation to the boundary unless I want to swim along various rivers and trespass on private land. However, Somerset Life magazine has offered publicity for the walk when it takes place to help in the fund-raising effort, so here's hoping I get a bit more time to start it in sensible chunks. I have yet to hear of anyone else taking up the challenge to do a sponsored something-or-other to raise cushion funds for the Gallery – but John Yeo has said like to hear of anyone interested in doing a sponsored cycle-ride.

It's always good to hear of successes, but I'm going to tell of another of my failures during the year. You may remember that I put together a bid to get European funding through the Levels and Moors Local Action Group for a project that would create a series of video film shorts that we would be able to display as moving images in the gallery and at external events, showing many of our craftsmen at work. The proposal got to the stage of having been accepted in principle, but I was unable to find any person or group able to supply together up to £10 000 in match funding. In the meantime, the long delay between putting in the bid and getting the whole business plan set up meant that we ran out of time, so the whole process would have to be started again. It is time to accept defeat on that one. But I still believe that it would be a good thing to have moving images of our craft members on display in the gallery. Craft is, after all, a hands-on business, and sometimes visitors need to be persuaded that someone has actually fashioned with their own hands the amazing things they see in front of them. There are at least two possible ways forward – one would be to bid for a small business grant for a project up to £5 000 – but it would also need matched funding, the other would be a much more home-grown process of doing it ourselves, using any voluntary competent video film making expertise that we could muster and cooperating with volunteer members in their studios, spreading the process through a couple of years or so. I would dearly like to hear of anyone interested in helping to move this project on. There was one bit of light in this process. Our local County Councillor Jimmy Zouche responded to my initial call for sponsors by donating some funds from his Community chest. With it we have been able to buy a small HDTV monitor with DVD and other facilities, so we can now show any film snippets that

any of you might have of yourselves at work in your workshop. Do let me know if you have one – Dave Appleby for instance may be able to get hold of a copy of the film made in his workshop recently by a professional film company as he gave tuition to a beginner. The grant from Jimmy Zouche was also large enough to buy some second-hand collapsible exhibition plinths from Peter Vernon.

In the last year there has been a huge variety of shows at the Gallery, as you can see on one side of your events sheet. Ruth is always willing to discuss with you any ideas that you might have about your ideas for the theme of a show in the future. For instance, Jonathan Doney, who is a new craft member in printing and letterpress, suggested putting on a show that has now been planned for early next year which will include other related crafts such as bookbinding, calligraphy and letter-cutting. Ruth does an amazing job of marshalling the material and with very limited storage space manages to keep in-going and out-going materials under control. It would help her enormously if makers responded to her requests to bring in and take away show materials when she asks – otherwise it creates a huge logjam. She also has to keep us all aware that because of limited display space she cannot guarantee always to have out on display absolutely everything that makers may bring in. We have to leave it to her discretion what she is able to put out, and rely on her always to bear in mind the best interests of the members.

As you know, our landlords are the development company Retirement Villages. You may also be aware that they have submitted a planning application for the development of a large care home on the land that adjoins the Courthouse Gallery. Those plans have not met with favour from the Town, and the planning consultation process at District level is somewhat stalled on technical matters. No decision has yet been taken as to whether the development will be allowed. In mid-September we had a very useful on-site meeting with the architect and a couple of senior managers from Retirement Villages to voice our concerns about various aspects of the design and the implications of the development for our business. The talks were most constructive, and I believe that if the plans do get the go-ahead, we will have a well-refurbished and comfortable set of premises, brought up to good eco-friendly standards. We will, however, lose all the garage space at the back and the storage space of the cells area, so control of stock is going to be even more difficult. One of our major concerns was how we would manage to operate during the building operations if the development does get the go-ahead. We have two options. One is to close down the business altogether, with a consequent loss of trade and the destruction of an increasingly wide reputation. This does not seem the way to go. The second alternative is to move temporarily into nearby premises so that we can maintain our presence in Somerton and carry out some trade at the same time. A proposal that was talked over with Retirement Villages at our September meeting is that if and when building work starts, they would start by refurbishing the now-empty retail premises in West street on the other side of the tunnel. We would then move in there temporarily until work was finished on the Courthouse. Although we would be continuing our business operation, it would be on a reduced scale. This would mean a reduced income. But we have a Gallery Manager to employ, and so our income must be maintained. We will seek to get proportionate recompense from the developers for this. They are aware that we need to have this detailed discussion, but all hangs on whether they get the permission for the development to take place. So....watch this space.

One thing that was very evident from the discussions with Retirement Villages was that they are very keen – should I say desperate – to have us. We represent for them a very active, attractive and acceptable interface between them and the town. Our presence in Somerton is at last very much noted and welcomed by the town, too. At a recent discussion meeting I attended, put on by the town council that was aimed at deciding how the town should develop in the coming years, the Somerset Guild of Craftsmen figures very largely in their thinking and is seen as a major cultural attraction in the town centre.

We *are* gradually becoming established, and adverts are appearing all over the place – thanks to Ruth’s on-going efforts. Take for example the October edition of Conduit, which advertises in two places the recent ‘Glass Works’ exhibition. Take as a further example, the Somerset Walks map for Somerton, which says ‘*No visit (to Somerton) would be complete without investigating the town’s antique centre and the Somerset guild of Craftsmen, situated near the historic square*’. I should record in passing that during the year the Gallery has been visited by the Chair of the Crafts Council, Joanna Foster, and at least twice by Deborah Meaden, one of the den dragons, both of whom made purchases along with some very complimentary remarks.

A few days ago, we had a party of half a dozen pupils from Sherborne Girls School, with staff, spending an hour doing sketches of pieces in the gallery as part of their design and technology course. They may well wish to make arrangements with some of our makers to see them at work in their own workshops, and discuss the whole process of designing, making and marketing. This educational function of the Guild through the Gallery is an area which we might be able to develop, and help fulfil one of the stated object of the Guild.

The Gallery is approaching its busiest season, and for the first time we are going to be open on the three Sundays leading up to Christmas. I mentioned in my other paper that I had some good news. Compared with last year, over the last three months the Gallery receipts have been up 8.5%, and since January have been up 12.4%. This is good news, and would be amazing if we can maintain this trend in the bleak months and years ahead.

And Finally – that welcome word again – I must thank all members of the Guild for continuing to be so productive, inventive, and imaginative. Please continue to support the Guild, the Gallery and the people backstage who are doing their damndest to support you. Please keep up the good work and may your enterprises flourish in spite of the negative pressures from the big bad world.