

1851 Royal Commission Alumni Association

E-mail Newsletter, March 2004

Dear Royal Commission Alumnus,

Although we are now well into 2004, I should like to offer you every good New Year wish from the Royal Commission. It has been a busy winter here and we are now sorting through record numbers of applications for 1851 Research Fellowships.

When the Royal Commissioners met at their biennial Board of Management meeting on 4 December, they discussed, among other matters, the progress of the Alumni Association. We were able to report that with the inclusion of current fellows and scholars, we now have a total of 310 members signed up, the majority of whom have details on the web site.

One or two members have quite reasonably asked that their own personal address and e-mail should not be posted on the web site, to avoid exposure to junk or spam e-mails. If any of you would like to get in touch with a fellow alumnus whose contact details are not on the web site, you can always e-mail them through the Commission's office, where we will be only too happy to forward a message for you.

After the last newsletter a helpful recipient suggested that there are easier ways of sending it than in blocks of 80 or so addressees. This is true, and an address list could be created through our Imperial College server. The only snag is that you would not then be able to e-mail me direct as a reply, so I am looking further into the implications before changing. In the mean time I am sticking to the system I have used on earlier newsletters.

Alumni Science Evening in London, 5 February

As I informed you in the last newsletter, the Commission held its first Alumni event in London on 5 February. Held in the Gallery, part of Alan Baxter and Associates' headquarters near Smithfield, the event took the form of a Science Evening, showcasing the work of our second year Research Fellows. The six fellows gave fascinating short presentations on subjects as diverse as DNA, sun flares and insect flight dynamics, generating much interest and discussion. This was helped by having not only a number of previous research fellows in the audience but no fewer than 9 members of the Science Scholarships Committee as well.

The evening concluded with an enthralling address by the Committee's chairman, Sir John Meurig Thomas, lately Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge, on "The Unpredictability of Science and its Consequences", and was followed by an agreeable supper.

Future Alumni Events

As a result of the Alumni pilot evening it has been decided that such events will be a firm part of the Royal Commission's calendar and ideas have proliferated on how we might take the association forward with more evening events. These have included extending presentations to include Industrial Fellows and Industrial Design Students, more Science events with distinguished speakers and possibly formal dinners.

Do you have any other suggestions? While at the moment we are only planning for London-based events, are there enough members of the Alumni Association in other countries to consider getting together? Please let me have your thoughts so we can take them all onto account as Commissioners discuss future plans and we take the association forward. The aim is that more of you will be able to attend future events.

Exhibition Road Project

We hope that the profile of the Commission, and its legacy in the form of the unique cluster of cultural institutions which form its South Kensington estate, will soon be raised by a project to develop Exhibition Road, the main access to the area known as Albertopolis. The Royal

Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has engaged international architects Dixon Jones to draw up plans for development of Exhibition Road, through which over 10 million people a year pass to visit the museums and beyond.

The Royal Commission is playing a full part in this process, in particular to stress the common links between not only the museums, but also Imperial College, the Royal College of Art, Royal College of Music and the Albert Hall as the combined legacy of the Great Exhibition whose construction was supported by the Royal Commission.

Royal Albert Hall

On 30 March Her Majesty The Queen will visit the Royal Albert Hall to celebrate the completion of a major refurbishment of the Hall. Mentioned in the last newsletter, the £372m development programme was supported by a Heritage Lottery grant and large donations. As well as a major refurbishment throughout, it included the construction of the new South Porch and development of important new facilities beneath the Hall itself. This involved raising the Great Exhibition memorial, itself rededicated in 2001. The Hall has now been transformed from a much loved but rather dowdy monument to the Victorian age to one of London's finest cultural venues.

Funding of Higher Education and research

In February the Royal Commission awarded a Special Grant to the Foundation for Science and Technology, a London-based discussion forum which meets to debate issues affecting Science and Technology. The grant co-sponsored a discussion entitled "Is a fundamental review of university funding required?" where the speakers were Lord May, President of the Royal Society, Professor Sir Graeme Davies, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, Dr Mark Walport, Director of the Wellcome Trust and Professor Nick Cumpsty, Chief Technologist of Rolls Royce.

Discussions of this sort often generate more heat than light, usually from the more senior members of the community, but this event was enlivened by the presence of half a dozen current Royal Commission research and Industrial Fellows, who injected both reality and fresh perspectives into the debate.

Publications

For those of you who haven't already got a copy, I should like to remind you that the full Record of all 1851 Award Holders, from 1891 - 2000, remains available from this office, at the discounted price of £15. Details of how to order are on the Commissions main web site.

Also, as mentioned in earlier newsletters, the full story of the Great Exhibition and its unique legacy is told in the book 'The Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition' published two years ago. It quickly sold out, but I am pleased to say that we will soon be ordering another print run and I will inform you in a future newsletter as soon as it is available for purchase - at a discounted price, to you, of course!

Did you know?

The 1851 Great Exhibition was responsible for the following:

- The expression 'to spend a penny'. For the first time a charge was made to use public lavatories - those in the Crystal Palace. This was levied at one penny and during the course of the Great Exhibition 827,000 pennies were collected.
- The America's Cup originated in 1851 when a yacht race was arranged by the Royal Yacht Squadron, at Cowes, to commemorate the Great Exhibition. Nations were invited to enter a yacht to compete for a 100 sovereign cup and to the dismay of the Squadron, the race was won by the New York Yacht Club's schooner America. The trophy became known as the America's Cup and the British have been trying to win it back ever since.

Finally, please let me know **your** views in the association and your ideas on how it might be developed. Equally, I would be grateful for your comments on the newsletter, as well as stories which we might include – I am sure that many of you have interesting tales to tell!

On behalf of the Commissioners, I thank you again for your support of the Alumni Association.

With best wishes,

Malcolm Shirley,
Secretary to the Commission.