

Presentation to Academicians and Friends of the RCA at the National Museum of Wales in 2015 by Bob Shires

My name is Bob Shires and I've been a friend of the Royal Cambrian Academy for many years and I've been volunteering at the gallery since I retired about three years ago.

18 months ago I was asked if I would like to have a look at the archives we have in Crown Lane, I think we had had a request for information about a past member which needed researching, and it's been my pleasure since, to spend the occasional day reading the official minute books and other records held at the gallery.

I have been particularly looking forward to today's visit, which has afforded us the opportunity to see the part of the RCA archive held here at the National Library of Wales, and particularly to compare the draft minute books with the official books still held in Conwy.

When I started reading the archive I thought that it might be useful to assemble what I have described to myself as a timeline – in other words a list of events and details in ascending date order, and from this I thought I would describe to you, today, some interesting and maybe not so interesting facts about the RCA of which you might not be particularly aware.

For example, it became the tradition in the early years of the Academy to invite the President of the Royal Academy in London to become an honorary member, so the RCA is able to boast of having had eminent artists of the day, Lord Leighton, Sir Frank Dicksee, and Sir John Everett Millais as members as well as Edward Burne-Jones, who the minutes hint also accepted honorary membership.

Another fact is that within a year of establishing the RCA in 1882 the council unanimously voted to move the headquarters to Cardiff, and that a permanent gallery, schools and annual exhibition would be sited there. During the early years great effort was put into achieving this aim, including, at a meeting of the council in 1883, the suspension of the rules of the academy for the duration of the meeting, whilst 4 new academicians from Cardiff were rapidly appointed, however, by the time of the second Cardiff Exhibition in the summer of 1885 the academy was becoming disillusioned with the lack of progress. The 1885 exhibition lost the Academy money and at a special meeting in November of that year it was decided that the headquarters would remain in North Wales until such time as Cardiff fulfilled its part of the agreement to provide the Academy with suitable accommodation; this led immediately to discussions with Lord Mostyn to take occupancy of Plas Mawr in Conwy.

In amongst details of these momentous decisions by the Academy the minute books also record fascinating trivia, in 1910 the academy bought its first vacuum cleaner, although it was another thirteen years before electricity was installed, the minutes don't readily explain this anomaly! In 1923 a telephone was installed, it was a party line, does anyone remember them? Also in 1923 quotes were requested for electric light in the Victoria gallery, an estimate of £16-8s-0p from Mr A Lance was accepted. In 1882 the membership fee for members of the Academy was one Guinea, and the caretaker at Plas Mawr was awarded a salary of £20 per year and free lodgings. In 1951 the Academy became a Limited Company with a licence to omit Limited from its title, I suspect this was superseded when the Academy became a registered charity; and in 1923 the Academy donated £10 towards the restoration of the Richard Wilson memorial window in Mold Church, Richard Wilson's importance as a Welsh artist was well recognised by the Academy.

During the years that the Academy occupied Plas Mawr, the minutes show there was continually items of expense for repairs to roofs and windows, but the Academy probably got off lightly; at a meeting in 1883 it was proposed that Conwy Castle was the most suitable position in North Wales for the Academy's permanent gallery and it was agreed by the council, that an application be made to the Mayor and Corporation of Conwy for the use of the entire Castle in perpetuity, there is no record of a reply..... and they thought that Plas Mawr was expensive to run! In 1904 the President reported to the Council that the chapel behind Plas Mawr had been offered to the Academy for £400, it was considered, but ultimately rejected as not being suitable for the RCAs needs, it took another 85 years before this decision was reversed!

Over the early years, there are a number of instances recorded where the RCA took on a campaigning stance over matters that concerned them. In the late 1800s and early 1900s they took issue over the planned building of chemical works in Deganwy, they complained over the vibration caused by heavy vehicles passing through Conwy and the suggestion that buildings might be erected in the Conwy Town ditch adjacent to the ancient walls. In 1923 they actively campaigned against the erection of electricity poles by the North Wales Power Company in the Conwy Valley, rather ironically this was discussed at the same meeting that the council gave the go ahead for electric light in the Victoria Gallery, perhaps the first recorded example of Nimbyism! From the early 1900s there are references to the threat to beech woods in Betws Y Coed, and this so concerned the Academy that in 1921 they took a lease on Pentre Du Woods, with a view to protecting them from being felled, this adventure nearly backfired on the Academy as even in those days tourists could be a problem and in 1929 matters came to a head when the Forestry Commission had cause to write to the RCA to remind them of their responsibilities as the tenant to prevent fires being lit in the woods. On legal advice the RCA rapidly surrendered the lease, the potential cost involved in compensating a neighbour for timber lost in a fire found to have started in the Academy's woodland could have been disastrous.

At some stage last year, it was suggested that it might be useful to know the name of the Royal Cambrian Academy's first female member. I think it might have been Wendy Couling or Ann Lewis that asked the question and it turned out to be an interesting bit of investigation.

The history of the Academy published in the Centenary Catalogue in 1982 tells us that Miss E Trevor was one of the original thirty members in 1882; however this doesn't fit comfortably with statements in the minute books of the period. According to the minute books women were at least thrice denied to misquote the biblical phrase.

In February 1882 in response to an application from a Carrie Walker the committee resolved to advise her that the committee had not yet come to any determination as to the admission of ladies.

Again in January 1888 a motion was passed that lady candidates be informed that the Academy had not yet decided as to the admission of lady candidates.

Then thirdly in January 1891 it was resolved by the committee to put before the members at the AGM that the council of the RCA were unanimously of the opinion that it was not advisable to entertain applications for associateship from lady artists, and that they strongly recommend the members not to put forward the name of any lady to the ballot.

This stance obviously contradicts the idea that Elizabeth Trevor was the first female Academician in 1882.

I found the answer to this apparent contradiction in the exhibition catalogues of the time.

The 1885 Swansea Exhibition Catalogue has Elizabeth listed as an exhibitor, but does not afford her the letters RCA after her name.

The 1884 Cardiff Catalogue lists E Trevor as an Academician.

The 1883 Catalogue lists E Trevor as an Academician, but does not afford her RCA letters after her name in the separate list of artist's details.

However in the 1882 Catalogue E Trevor is listed as an Academician, but in the artist details E Trevor is listed as Edward.

It turns out there were two E Trevors both exhibiting work at the early exhibitions and over time this distinction has been lost.

Further research on the internet explains that Elizabeth and Edward Trevor were brother and sister and were both accomplished artists.

The 1891 census shows they were living at the Bluebell Inn in Conwy where their father was the innkeeper, the census had them both listed as seascape artists. Edward Trevor died in 1885, but Elizabeth Trevor married another Academician, Lester Sutcliffe, and she died in 1944 age 90.

But where does this leave the search for our first RCA lady academician.

It was not until 1920 that any change in attitude towards female artists can be detected.

In January 1920 it was proposed that prominent female artists Mrs Laura Knight and Miss Lucy Kemp Welch be invited to become members. Lucy Kemp Welch is best remembered for her illustrations of Anna Sewell's Black Beauty, and Laura Knight was an eminent painter who broke taboos that women could not directly paint nude models, and later became the first woman elected to the Royal Academy in London.

Laura Knight is not recorded as having accepted the RCAs invitation, but Lucy Kemp Welch did and is listed as a member from 1921, followed by Florence Fitzgerald as an associate in 1922 and Clara Knight, (as opposed to Laura and no relation as far as I am aware), as an associate in 1923, upgraded to member in 1926.

Finally in 1925 the rules of the RCA were changed to allow up to 10 lady members and 10 associates.

Whilst Lucy Kemp Welch was the first lady member, Clara Knight was the first lady artist with the appropriate Cambrian qualifications to be elected by her peers to full membership of the RCA.

Whilst it seems anachronous to us in 2015 that an organisation like the RCA should have been such an exclusive gentleman's club it is nice to remember that it wasn't until 15 years later in 1936 that Dame Laura Knight became the first woman to be elected to the Royal Academy.

In conclusion I would like to highlight the fact that the RCA s links to the National Library of Wales go right back to earliest days of the Library, it is recorded that an invitation was extended to the RCA to

witness the laying of the foundation stone in Aberystwyth, and President Sir Cuthbert Grundy took up the invitation on the RCAs behalf, demonstrating the importance attached to this event by all parties!