

The Poly in the time of Howard Spring

When Howard Spring joined the RCPS in 1940, it was a Society of 217 members. The Church Street building was owned by the Society, but parts of it were sub-let. There was a Library and the Falmouth Museum was housed in the gallery above the Large Hall and in the Chellew Room. A caretaker was employed. Elsewhere in Falmouth the Society ran a Meteorological Observatory. The focus of the Society as reflected in the Annual Reports of the 1940's was Cornwall wide, not only Falmouth, with lectures, visits, an essay competition, weather reporting, a library and museum.

At the Annual General Meeting of 1947, it was reported that: *“the Committee had seriously considered the position of the Society in the circumstances of the day and the changed conditions of the world around. They had debated the question of whether the Society could still render the service for which it was founded in the early days of the industrial revolution.”* Opinions were divided: *“Whilst some held that the Society had outlived the days of its need and value, others urged that it should try, at least for some few years, to adapt itself to the conditions of the day and to extend its activities in the field of education”* An Educational Adviser had been appointed, Miss PM Angove, County Organiser of the WEA. A start had been made during the year, with a mixed programme of seven lectures, a ‘One-Day School for student-teachers on Cornish subjects and two Exhibitions of pictures. Consideration had also been given the organisation of the existing Library, following which all novels and poetry had been handed over to the Falmouth Free Library and a cloakroom *“with up to date sanitation and washing facilities”* installed in the old caretaker’s room of the entrance hall. As a result *“the special facilities which the Society can offer to the community are the use of its rooms at moderate charges for lectures and exhibitions, and the use of its valuable library”*.¹

The AGM of May 1948 reported the use of the premises for educational exhibitions and a number of local societies, therefore continuing to serve members and the general public in the tradition of its Founders. The reconditioning of the premises, which had started with the Library, continued, but it became evident that the building needed structural attention. *“One sign of the urgency of the situation had been that falls of material from the front of the building were occurring to the danger of passers-by”*. In December 1948 an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) was held to appoint new Trustees and to consider the raising of a loan to cover the cost of repairs to the Society’s premises. This was agreed at up to £1,500, together with the establishment of a Fabric Repair Fund. Building improvements and repairs followed, largely funded by a mortgage on the premises.

¹ After the business of the 1948 AGM, Howard Spring gave a talk on “Writing Novels”.

In 1949, attention turned to the Large Hall. When the dance hall proprietor's lease ran out, the stage was rebuilt and the hall refurbished "*to provide a general purposes hall suitable for concerts, lectures, plays, exhibitions and assemblies of all kinds*". There was seating for up to 250 people and it was considered suitable even for "*professional productions on a small scale*". The new Polytechnic Hall was opened for use in mid October 1949, at a cost of about £1,500, of which £1,100 or so was in loans yet to be repaid. The first of the fund raising summer Garden Parties to be held in the Garden of Howard Spring was planned for June 1950. Several plays had already been put on there by local amateur groups, and a recording of the BBC's "Any Questions" programme.

The 1949 Annual Report included both an essay by Howard Spring on "The Functions of a Polytechnic Society" and one by Veronica Varley² on "Royal Cornwall Polytechnic Society 1833 and 1950" which suggested that in 1950 what had replaced the focus on heavy industry and physical sciences of the previous century were rural crafts, social sciences and the arts.

By 1950, the Falmouth Museum had been removed and replaced in the Chellew Room by a Maritime Museum and the Annual Exhibition was "The Rural Industries of Cornwall". However the overdraft secured on the premises had been increased to almost £2,000 and there were a further £590 in loans outstanding. At the 1950 Annual General Meeting, the Honorary Treasurer "*spoke of the increased use of the premises as a cultural centre for Falmouth and, indeed, for the County, and the promising returns since the Hall was re-opened in September, 1949*". In the evening after the AGM, a performance of "The Guinea Pig" by W Chetham-Strode³ was given, the proceeds of which (£41) were offered to the Society as a tribute to the rebuilding and re-equipping of the stage and hall.

The first production of Howard Spring's play "Jinny Morgan" was put on in 1951 to raise funds for the decoration of the Main Hall. The review of "A Gentle Assassin" in the Falmouth Packet in November 1952 refers to his earlier plays "Jinny Morgan" and "One Spring Morning". There is no mention in the 1950 or earlier Annual Reports of "One Spring Morning", so we do not yet know where or when it was first performed.

² Member Mrs V M Varley, of 'Bedruthan', Castle Drive, formerly Honorary Secretary of the Society who had made research into its early history.

³ 1896-1974. "The Guinea Pig" was written in 1946 and made into a film in 1948, starring Richard Attenborough