

# ARLIS

## UK & Ireland

### Art Libraries Society

#### **ARLIS 2014 to 2017: A View From the Chair**

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*'Looking through previous Chairs' reports I see that certain key words have kept surfacing, sinking and surfacing again over the years. Those words are challenge, change and consolidation. All three words have been applicable to 2015 and will apply to 2016 and beyond.'* Chair's Annual report 2015

The period 2014 - 2017 saw challenge, change and consolidation come together in a perfect storm, which came close to threatening the very future of ARLIS.

Council were aware of the need to adjust our structure and activities in order to reflect changes in the profession and remain relevant. Our traditional membership model was breaking down due to mergers of art colleges and the paring back of library services in many institutions. Council was a large body supplemented by many committees all working on great projects but all requiring regular attendance and incurring expenses. Given the hardships faced by the profession, it was becoming increasingly difficult to recruit senior officers. Moreover, it was getting harder to balance income and expenditure as institutions increased charges for the use of their premises for our meetings and events.

On 18 June 2015, after long and thorough negotiation, ARLIS entered a partnership with Cambridge University Press (CUP) for the publication of Art Libraries Journal (ALJ) beginning with issue 41 in 2016. The timing was perfect on a symbolic level as it was a fantastic way of celebrating the ALJ's fortieth year. The partnership with CUP clearly offered many benefits to ARLIS but the proposed new business model made it necessary to implement changes to institutional membership as a matter of urgency as this was largely defined by subscriptions to the ALJ. The timing of business sensitive negotiations made it impossible to discuss these issues at the 2015 Annual General Meeting; so the highly unusual step had to be taken of holding a Special General Meeting during the Annual Conference in Cardiff, at which the proposed changes were ratified. In early 2016 the ARLIS Newsletter also went digital as ARLIS Matters.

In contrast to the successful publication of the new-look ALJ and ARLIS Matters, 2016 sadly saw the need to postpone the annual conference which was to due have been held in Dublin. Delays in appointing a Conference Working Party combined with the temporary hiatus in regular income caused by the transfer of the journal to CUP made it risky to embark on planning a conference in an expensive location in an unusually busy year. Fortunately, good financial stewardship by a series of prudent Hon. Treasures meant we had sufficient reserves to cover costs during the troubled times, but not enough to take risks. The decision was taken to hold the conference in Dublin in July 2017. The 2017 conference took the usual three-day format but with the difference that delegates were responsible for booking their own accommodation; thus negating the need to pay deposits for university accommodation as in previous years. The postponement, though disappointing at the time, brought some benefits. As well as more time to organise the programme, the National Gallery of Ireland reopened after refurbishment just in time to act as one of the host institutions.

The decision to postpone the annual conference was hard enough but an even more painful decision was also taken in 2016. It was rapidly becoming obvious to senior officers that ARLIS could no longer afford to employ a full time Business Manager. ARLIS was like an ocean liner that continued to sail with a large crew when our membership and income was declining. There was little choice but to become a smaller vessel and the sensible though painful way to do this was by making the post of Business Manager redundant. The then holder Lorraine Blackman left in September 2016 after seven years' excellent service. From then on Members of Council had to get used to dealing with all of the matters that were formerly carried out by the Business Manager with little time to arrange a handover. This was daunting for all involved, but the challenge was accepted and indeed welcomed as being an opportunity to overhaul and simplify our routines and move to a fresh and flexible approach to our activities.

Throughout all these challenges and changes, a Working Group carried out a wider review of our structures and membership rates in attempt to enable the society to make informed decisions and provide vision during the transition to being a fully volunteer organisation. Some voices questioned whether ARLIS would be able to survive at all, or whether we should re-group and severely cut back our activities. Due to the enthusiasm and commitment of everyone involved, such a hard line approach was avoided. The various committees continued to meet, members continued to participate in activities and events

seamlessly, without being fully aware of the difficulties the organisation faced, and the heavy stress felt by members of Council and organisers. At the AGM in 2017, a couple of committees laid themselves down in an attempt to simplify the overall structure. This move, although encouraged by the senior officers, was not universally welcomed as the committees were a popular way for members to contribute to the life of the society. Nevertheless, the increasing difficulties in finding committee chairs and senior officers and absence of a Business Manager coupled with a need to strengthen governance and accountability within the society made this a necessary step.

Despite the challenges, changes and consolidation that came together in the *annus horribilis* of 2016, the financial situation improved as the ALJ, conferences and other activities generated income and everyone worked together to ensure that ARLIS would be in a secure position to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2019.