

# A year in the life of a branch co-ordinator

**Jenni Hyde** takes us through an exciting year with the Bolton Branch and provides some great ideas for other branch secretaries.



Jenni Hyde, Bolton Branch Secretary.

## September

It's the second week of September and here at the Bolton Branch we're all ready to start our new year. The first meeting of the season is our Annual General Meeting – it's a chance for members to hear what we've been up to and to share their ideas for the future. It's also a chance for them to raise any concerns, if they should have any. Tonight, someone asked about how our branch finances compare with others, and it was good to be able to tell them that our branch is financially healthy. As a charity, we're not here to make a profit, but we need enough reserves to keep us going in case times should ever get tough. Our income is mainly made up of our branch (associate) members' subscriptions along with a quota from head office, but in Bolton we also charge a small fee to visitors and we host a monthly bring-and-buy history book sale. Most of our expenses are fairly predictable from one year to the next, as room hire and administration costs tend to stay much the same. In the HA, we're lucky that lecturers don't charge a fee for speaking, but we do pay their expenses and these can vary quite dramatically from month to month.

As well as the treasurer's report, we also hear brief reports from the chairman, who introduces the new season's programme, and the secretary (that's me). I present the report that I sent to head office in the summer, detailing the activities of the branch over the previous season and making a special note of any particular successes or challenges that we've faced. Of course, the AGM is also the time when the branch committee is elected. In Bolton we're pleased to have eight committee members, which means that there's always someone to help out if we need it.

Following the AGM, we hear a short paper, often given by a research student from a local university. It gives them a chance to share their work with a public audience, without the pressure of it being a full-length paper. This year, however, our paper was from a representative of Lancashire Archives. We invited her because the branch had made a small donation towards the cataloguing of a newly-acquired and locally-significant archive.

Most importantly, though, our September event is a chance to meet and greet any new members, to welcome them to the branch.

This year, we are taking our branch publicity board (and a hoard of free HA pencils) into Bolton Library too. We hope that talking to library visitors on a Saturday will help to raise the profile of the branch in the community, so we've got plenty of programme brochures to give away too.

## October

October is our first full-length lecture, given by an academic from a north-west university. This month, it's the return of a favourite speaker, which of course helps to pull in the audience: we all know it's going to be a good night. Dr Stella Fletcher fascinated our members by showing how history is just as much about the time in which it is written as it is about a time in the past. Stella Fletcher's article 'The Borgias: from fact to fiction' can be read on pages 26-29 of this issue.

The treasurer is again kept busy taking membership fees from our associates, as more people come to this meeting than the AGM (I can't imagine why...). We've also got a new crop of sixth form helpers from our host school to provide the refreshments after the meeting and we're pleased to have a student from another school to take over our social media activities on Twitter and Facebook as voluntary work for his Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award. Social media requires a regular presence in order

Branch publicity stand at Bolton Library.



to maintain people's interest, but I was finding it too much to include in my role, so it's great to have someone who can spend just a few minutes every evening finding interesting history content to share – it all helps to publicise the branch and the association as a whole.

## November

It's the first Saturday in November and I'm up early, hopping on a train to the annual branch officers' meeting in London. It's a long day for me, but it's always worth going, not least because it's a chance to meet up with people from other branches. We get to hear news from head office and to meet the President; we hear about best practice regarding things like data protection and curriculum developments; but, most importantly, there's time to talk things over with other branches. Popular topics of conversation include speaker recommendations, encouraging students to attend meetings and finding suitable venues, but they are as varied as the people that attend. I always go home with an idea or two to try out in Bolton, and as head office pay our expenses, it doesn't cost me or the branch. I often make the most of the trip by fitting in a quick visit to the British Museum or

British Library while I'm there.

But November turns out not to be all good: a few days later I'm given the shock of a speaker pulling out for family reasons only an hour or so before the lecture was due to start. Speakers do cancel occasionally, so it helps if you can find a couple of 'tame' academics that you can call on either to step in or to ask for suggestions. In the past, I've been helped out by some absolute stars, but it's never been at quite that short notice. On this occasion, I stepped in myself, as I'd just finished writing a paper to deliver later in the week. My next job? To ask a couple of our members if they'd consider being on standby for any similar crises in the future. They're not academics, but I know they'd deliver an interesting talk and they are there every month – and it pays to be prepared!

## December

As other people are thinking about Christmas, the Bolton Branch's committee meets to start thinking about the new year. Our committee only meets twice a year, so it's not an onerous responsibility. At Christmas, we have an interim finance report, we discuss any problems that have arisen and hear a report from the branch officers'



Stella Fletcher





Bolton members enjoying a lecture.



meeting. We also start planning our summer event. This year, we're linking up with Bolton Museum and Library Service to host a lecture and hands-on session looking at their collection of satirical cartoons. We've also got a stand at the HA conference in Manchester to organise, so it's all very exciting.

December is also when I canvass the committee's ideas for future seasons and find out if anyone on the committee has heard a really good speaker lately. We particularly enjoyed Dr Stephen Kelly's fascinatingly-entitled lecture 'The Finesse of a Mentally Subnormal Elephant – Airey Neave, Margaret Thatcher and Northern Ireland 1975-79', so we'll definitely be inviting him back at some point in the future. We all left that meeting with a much better understanding of Neave, and with him, the Northern Ireland peace process. We even discovered that Thatcher and Neave both supported the reintroduction of the death penalty after the Birmingham pub

bombings, but that they were overruled by the rest of Cabinet. In Bolton, we make all our speakers honorary members of the branch. It's a way of saying thank you to them for their time and effort. What's more, we know the speakers appreciate it – a few years ago Professor Lord Peter Hennessy hosted a major reception at the House of Lords for politicians and historians at all levels from school to university. Professor Hennessy introduced himself as an Honorary Member of the Bolton Branch in front of an audience that included Andrew Marr, Lady Antonia Fraser, Al Murray and Bettany Hughes!

## January

It's new year, so it's time for me to start thinking in detail about the programme for next season. Organising the programme is an ongoing job, but I've now got to make an effort to fill any spaces that aren't filled. I try to balance male and female speakers, new

scholars and respected experts, a range of places and times and topics. The branch officers' area on the HA website has a searchable list of speakers if I'm short of ideas, but I also take advice from the committee and my friendly academics. It's always a good idea to ask the speakers we've already had if they can recommend anyone, too. I usually contact speakers by email and give them a choice of dates, but sometimes the telephone proves more efficient as it's less easy to ignore!

There's always a bit of worry about the January weather, so this month I've got a local expert speaking about local history. There are plenty of specialist local history societies in the area, but I always like to include one local topic on the programme if I can. Tonight we find out all about the restoration of the Bury and Bolton Canal. It's also the night to begin promoting our summer archive event. Summer seems a long way off, but it's important to start encouraging our members to come along and to bring their friends, not least because it's different from the activities we normally undertake.

## February

Every month I send out an e-newsletter to our branch members through the branch officers' area of the HA website, and now it's time to co-ordinate some material for the next few months – a book review, a place to go and, of course, details of the next meeting. The book reviews are written by other members of the committee, which is great because it lets members hear someone else's voice for a change! I also send a monthly publicity email to local media and other societies with similar interests. They

Professor Lord Peter Hennessy, an honorary member of the Bolton branch.





rarely generate a response, but as it's so easy to copy material from our website, I might as well.

While I'm preparing the newsletters, I might as well check that the branch website is up to date. We used to have a stand-alone site, but now we use a Wordpress blog (other blogging sites are available!). It has several advantages: it's easy to update, it looks professional and, even more importantly, it allows people to sign up to follow us. This means that they get an email alert any time I post any content. As well as listing our current programme, I include write-ups of the lectures. These are often provided by the students who attend the meetings (in return, we give them the President's Award of Studentzone membership of the association). I also try to advertise the activities of other history societies in the area. The blog is linked directly to our Facebook and Twitter feeds, so when I put something on the blog it is automatically advertised on social media too.

Our February lecture from Dr Jonathan Hogg was about England in the nuclear age. One GCSE pupil attending the lecture commented, 'I found it fascinating because I have just started my GCSEs and it joined both my passion for science and my passion for history, as well as revealing that I didn't know about how nuclear weapons were created and used. I think it will be very useful for me as next year I will be studying the Cold

War in history and radioactivity and nuclear power in physics.'

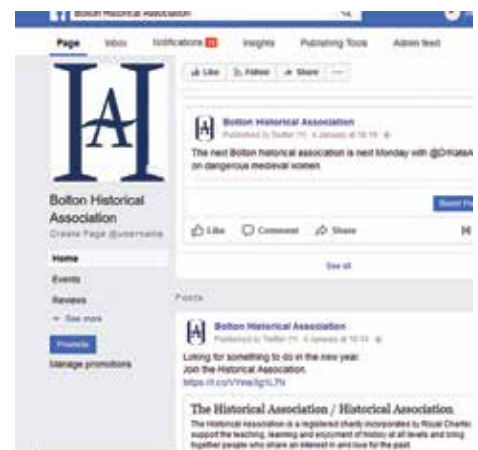
### March

This is our final Monday evening branch meeting of the year, and this time we're looking overseas to the United States for our subject matter: 'Today is a good day to fight – the Montana campaign and Battle of the Little Big Horn'. It was a lively evening, both stimulating and thought-provoking, yet also including many humorous anecdotes to keep the audience entertained. Professor Alexander commented that many of us think we know about the battle from film and television, from the Penguin books of childhood and more scholarly historical tomes; there is even a board game! According to Professor Alexander, Custer was brave but not always smart. He came from a quite poor background and he wanted glory and fame, in what was the first modern media age.

It's also the last chance to promote our archive event in person. It's disappointing that take-up of the places has been rather slow. I know that other branches use the summer months to go on trips, but it's something that doesn't really work well for us. The branch used to hold a social event in May, but the numbers dwindled dramatically in the early 2000s and it ceased to be viable. I know of at least one branch, though, where as long as a cream tea is involved, the members will go anywhere!

### April

This month I am putting the finishing touches to our programme – I'm pleased to say that I've got the HA President, Professor Tony Badger, visiting the branch next March. It's also time to begin putting together the publicity materials for next season. Head office can provide some of these, but I prefer to



Branch publicity now takes many forms.





Branch exhibition stand at the HA Conference, Manchester.

create my own, as once the pro-forma is drawn up, it's only a matter of changing the lecture details from year to year. Speaking of head office, it's nearly time to ask for the branch members' address labels...

## May

This year May is a particularly busy month, because the HA conference is being held in Manchester and the branch is going to have a stand at the conference exhibition. This brings with it a flurry of emails and phone calls to organise the practicalities – when do we set up and strike the stand, how many people can attend? Even though most of the conference delegates will not be able to attend Bolton branch meetings, I think it's really important to give them a flavour of branch life. Looking at our table-top publicity board, it's going to need a bit of freshening up before the big weekend arrives.

Ahead of the conference, I've got our second committee meeting to organise. The agenda includes the draft treasurer and secretary's reports, as well as an item on our attempts to raise the profile of the branch in the local community. That should lead to some interesting discussions.

As the month progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that our special event at Bolton Museum is not drawing much of an audience. Only 12 of the 20 places at the hands-on session have been booked, but it's too late to cancel as the Archives have already confirmed our booking and the lecturer has already been to view their satirical prints – he's even made the effort to base his talk on items from the Bolton collection. My attempt to boost interest includes sending out an extra publicity email, and I am rewarded with an interview on a local community radio station Bolton FM. Unfortunately, it does little to help

and turnout at the event is ultimately disappointing, especially given the effort that the museum and the lecturer put in.

## June

Now is the time to get my publicity materials for next season printed. We get enough programme brochures to last all year, including sending two to each member (the idea being that they give one away). I also need 35 posters for each meeting. In addition, there are the AGM agendas, the minutes of the last AGM and the covering letters to print. It makes for quite a heavy box when it's done, and fortunately I have a friend with a printing business who does the work for us so it doesn't cost too much.

When I've got all the materials, I will meet up with the treasurer to co-ordinate the summer mailing. Our first job is to make sure that the members' addresses are all up to date (do we really have a primary corporate member in Sutton Coldfield?). Then we have a pleasant morning stuffing envelopes with letters and brochures, while putting the world to rights and drinking copious amounts of tea. I know that there are some branches who send almost nothing through the post any more, using the internet for everything instead. We did try it one year too, but it didn't work for us.

The other job for June is to send my branch report and an unformatted copy of our programme to head office – along with our audited accounts, that's what gets us our quota!

## July

Summer is the time to take a bit of a breather – but I might as well get ahead of the game by putting next season's events on the HA website and our branch blog. I make sure that the lecturers have supplied a bit of information about their lectures, and try to find an appropriate image on Wikimedia Commons to liven things up a bit. It's also another chance to check that all the details are correct on the website.

## August

The year has gone full circle, and now I find myself confirming the meeting details with our first speaker – it's time to invite everyone to the AGM!

Jenni Hyde is Associate Vice President of the Historical Association and secretary of the Bolton Branch. Her first book, *Singing the News: ballads in mid-Tudor England*, was published by Routledge in February 2018.



Student volunteers from Bolton School Girls' Division serve refreshments.