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Continuing Change: Manchester Geographical Society, 1998-2010

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Abstract

This article details the changes which have happened in the Manchester Geographical Society in the thirteen years up to its change of charitable status in 2010. The principal topics are lectures, grants, journal and finances.

Keywords

Manchester Geographical Society, institutional history

This is the fifth instalment of the Society's history, following the overlapping contributions by Brown (1971), Leigh (1980), Freeman (1984) and Hindle (1998); the last of those detailed a period of 'turmoil and transition' from 1973 to 1997 in which the Society changed quite drastically. In the thirteen years since then it has continued to change and evolve, notably in relation to the lectures, grants and the journal. The finances have also gone through dramatic changes, and the membership almost halved. The culmination of this period was the closure of the Society's city-centre office in 2009 and the change in its charitable status in 2010, in which the Society ceased to have members. This article is based on the author's personal experience as well as the Society's Annual Reports and Council minutes.

Lectures

The lecture series has long been the principal visible activity of the Society; indeed for most members of the Society it was the main or only activity the Society appeared to do. Most lectures were held on Tuesday lunchtimes, but in 1997-8 there were still two joint evening lectures; the so-called (and clearly mis-named) 'Tripartite' lecture with the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) and the Geographical Association, and the 'Herbertson' lecture with the GA alone. The Herbertson ceased after 2001 largely because of incompatible timing (MGS members were reluctant to attend evening lectures, and most GA members were working at lunchtime). The last joint lecture with the RGS(IBG) was in 2005; by then few or none of their members attended. There was a special joint lecture with the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, celebrating John Dalton, in 2003. Digital projection

equipment was bought in 2008 with a grant from Awards for All.

Due to the possibility of redevelopment of the Friends' Meeting House, uncertainty over lecture room bookings (FMH indicated that they were not taking bookings after January 2010), on-going disputes over the mis-use of Society equipment and a significant proposed price rise of the lecture room, the lecture venue was moved to Cross Street Chapel in 2009. As part of the change of charitable status in 2010 the Society ceased to have members, and instead offered a 16-lecture series, free to all; anyone making an annual donation to the Society was called a 'Friend' of the Society, and was placed on a mailing list. Making the lectures free was in line with increasing the 'public benefit' provided by the Society as a charity, as encouraged by the Charity Commission.

Grants

In 1998 the Society was offering four types of grant: the Research Fund (which was to provide articles for the Journal), Student Prizes, Departmental Book/Map Grants and the Centenary Scholarship, totalling over £8000. In 2000 in order to reduce expenditure the Departmental Grants were reduced to zero, and the Centenary Scholarship reduced to cover fees only (it was reduced to zero in 2001). From 2001 until 2009 the only grants awarded were Research Grants and the Student Prizes. Research Grants hit a low point in 2003 when there was only one application; from then all professional geographers in the north west (rather than just those in the three Greater Manchester departments) were invited to apply for them. In 2004 it was agreed that Research Grant applicants did not have to be members of

the Society. Undergraduate Dissertation Bursaries were introduced in 2007 and Postgraduate Conference Fee support in 2010. A research proposal on the history of the Society in conjunction with Liverpool University in 2008-9 failed to attract external funding.

Journal

The 3rd Series of the Society Journal was launched in 1997 under the title *The North West Geographer*, widening its geographical remit from that of *The Manchester Geographer* which had ceased publication in 1993. Its editorial policy was to publish scholarly articles on the north west of England for academics, teachers and students, but articles on other parts of the world were not precluded. The then Editor proposed a complex administrative system, including a large Editorial Advisory Board, but in 1997 he took up a post in Scotland which hindered communication. 250 copies of the first volume were printed, but only 95 were sold or issued. The journal appeared irregularly, and ran for only six issues, two in 1997, one in 1998 and three in 2000; this meant that the annual cost varied between zero and £3588, making budgeting impossible. Three of the issues were themed (agri-environmental solutions, sounds of Manchester, leisure and exclusion). Guest editors were used: Vol 1/2 was edited by Craig Young and Carol Morris, and Vol 3/2 by Euan Hague. An innovation was to require recipients of Research Fund money to submit an article or report to the journal within two years (one year from 2006), thus in theory providing a constant stream of articles; the system has worked fairly well.

During 2000 and 2001 there was much discussion about the future of the journal, and the idea of a free e-journal emerged, which would operate at little cost, saving printing and postage costs. But again the Editor intended to have an even more complex administrative system (the proposal was 48 pages long). The Council minutes record a frequent lack of communication with the Editor, and in November 2001 Dr Hindle took over. The journal (now effectively in its 4th series) was renamed as *North West Geography*. It had a small editorial team, a simple administrative system and the first two issues of Volume 1 appeared by February 2002 (both with a 2001 date); it has continued to date, usually with two volumes a year. By the end of 2010 the 17 issues have contained almost 50 items from full articles to book reviews, and an occasional series on the 'North West in Maps'. The journal publishes articles on the north west; there is no undertaking to publish articles on other parts of the world, and none has appeared since 2002. The journal now costs very little – typically 2% of total

expenditure. Dr Cathy Delaney (Manchester Metropolitan University) has remained as Deputy Editor, responsible for physical geography papers.

Website

The Society set up its website in 2000. The fieldwork guide *Exploring Greater Manchester* was originally produced in printed format in 1998, and was published on-line from 2003. The centenary volume of *The Manchester Geographer* (Vol 5, 1984), with Freeman's history and a selection of items from 1885 to 1962, was put on-line in 2009. In 2010, up to mid-November, the website had been visited by 10,740 visitors who made 14,710 visits and viewed 28,240 pages. The most popular items were those in *Exploring Greater Manchester*; in particular the guide to Angel Meadow.

North West

There was on-going discussion about whether the Research Fund and the Journal should fund only research done in the north west. Various wordings were agreed at different times: 'might give preference to', 'concentrate on', 'support research done in and on', and 'must relate to' the north west. This was finalised in the 'objects' of the Society in the 2010 Trust Deed as: 'To encourage/publish geographical research on or relevant to the north west of England.'

Office

The Society had maintained its office in the basement of the Friends' Meeting House since the IRA bomb in 1996. The office was staffed by Assistant Secretary Julia Concannon until 2007 and then by Gerald Hudd; in 2010 he effectively became Assistant Treasurer. The FMH began considering a major refurbishment in 2008, and it was likely that the Society would lose its office for some time. The Society's office lease ran until August 2009, and due to the uncertain future at the FMH the decision was taken to close the office, and not to seek a replacement. Most of the old journals were sold, and the office was vacated in March 2009. The official address of the Society is now that of the Hon. Secretary, and for financial matters, that of the Hon. Treasurer. Closing the office made a major financial saving, in excess of £2500 a year.

Membership

Membership had been just above the 100 mark during most of the 1980s and 1990s. It peaked at about 140 in the period 1997-2002, but then went into a steep decline, to only 74 in 2009. The decline was principally due to an aging membership, and the failure to attract new younger

members, rather than to a reduction in popularity of the lectures. This decline was one reason contributing to the abolition of the membership in 2010.

Finances

The principal financial change has been the drop in income of 55% over the period, as seen in the Table below. As the Society obtains the bulk of its income from investments, this change is totally outside its control. The Society was slow to alter its patterns of expenditure, resulting in large deficits which peaked in 2000, made worse by the production of three journals in that year. The deficits were much reduced by 2002, and the accounts show a surplus in 2004. The cost of lectures (including hall hire) has remained surprisingly constant, though as a proportion of expenditure the percentage has increased. Grants reached an all-time low of £485 in 2004, but are now averaging £3500 a year. The journal expenditure up to 2000 was erratic, being zero in 1999. But the change to the e-journal has meant the costs are now generally under £200 a year. The total charitable expenditure is now running at almost 80% of income – a great improvement on earlier years. The ‘Other’ expenditure is mostly administrative costs, and the disposal of the office in 2009 has produced significant savings. The loss of members in 2010 will mean that income may be further reduced, but anyone attending the lectures is invited to make a donation to the Society (officially becoming a ‘Friend’), and this new income stream may partly make up for the loss of membership income.

The Society has had professional investment management throughout the period by John Eckersley (of Henry Cooke, Lumsden then Solus, then Castlefield Investments); a finance sub-committee meets him annually. At first the level of charges was substantial (in some years about 20% of total expenditure), but a change was agreed in 2005, and charges now run at about 5% of expenditure. In 2004 the Society agreed a statement on reserves for the Charity Commission. The table below follows on from Table 1 on page 17 in Hindle (1998) [note that in that table the Total Charitable figures in the fourth line should be moved one column to the right and italicised].

Charitable Status

Minor changes to the Constitution were made in 1999, 2001 and 2006. Council began to consider the charitable status of the Society in 2009. It was noted that the Society had only 74 members (61 paying annually), and that the Society was effectively subsidising each paying member by over £30 a year. It was noted that there might be problems with the Charity Commission’s axiom that charities must be for public (not members’) benefit. After several long discussions in Council and at the 2009 AGM it was agreed to abolish the membership, have the Society run by the Trustees, and to run a free 16-lecture series each year. After discussions with the Charity Commission the Society was advised to change from being an Unincorporated Organisation to a Charitable Trust, run by the Trustees. The Commission’s Model Trust Deed was adopted (with a few alterations), and the new

MGS Expenditure; selected years to 31st March 1998-2010

	1998		2000		2005		2010	
	£	%	£	%	£	%	£	%
INCOME	17063		12728		9286		7875	
EXPENDITURE:								
Lectures ¹	2203	11	2083	10	2259	23	2472	34
Grants	8075	39	5195	26	2300	24	3094	42
Journal ²	2514	12	3590	18	55	1	225	3
Total Charitable	12792	61	10868	54	4614	48	5791	79
Other	8051	39	9373	46	5039	52	1554	21
TOTAL	20844		20228		9653		7345	
Surplus (Deficit)	(3781)		(7500)		(367)		530	

1 includes hire of hall, meetings and lecture fees

2 includes Fieldwork Guide

Charitable Trust was set up. At a General Meeting in March 2010 the old Society was dissolved and its assets transferred to the new Society. The Trustees now report directly to the Charity Commission each year, there being no members and no Annual General Meeting.

Conclusion

In a period when the Society's income has fallen by 55%, the Society has responded by cutting its expenditure, crucially increasing the proportion spent on charitable items. It has made significant savings by publishing its journal on-line, closing its office, reducing grants for several years, whilst maintaining a lecture programme. The Society is financially

secure, it has simplified its administration, and looks forward to being able to increase the amount it can contribute to research and publishing on (or relevant to) the north west.

Note and Acknowledgments

The author has been a member of the Council of the Society since 1983, and remains a Trustee. Readers should be aware that this history is a personal view, based on the Society's records; it is hoped that an unbiased picture has been given. The article has not been externally refereed, but a draft was circulated to three of those who had been Officers of the Society during the period. The author is grateful to Rod Allman, Colin Harrison and Wilf Theakstone for their helpful comments.

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Appendix: Principal Officers of the Society, 1998-2011

Throughout this period B P Hindle was Secretary and W H Theakstone was Treasurer.

Year ¹	President	Editor	Chairman	Programme
1998-99	<i>Vacant</i>	J H McKendrick	W R Allman	D L Ferguson
1999-00	<i>Vacant</i>	J H McKendrick	W R Allman	D L Ferguson ²
2000-01	N R Pakes	J H McKendrick	W R Allman	C Harrison
2001-02	N R Pakes	J H McKendrick ³	M G Lee	C Harrison
2002-03	N R Pakes	B P Hindle	M G Lee	<i>Vacant</i> ⁴
2003-04	J E Mitchell	B P Hindle	M G Lee	J P Lynn
2004-05	J E Mitchell	B P Hindle	W R Allman	J P Lynn
2005-06	C Harrison	B P Hindle	W R Allman	J P Lynn
2006-07	C Harrison	B P Hindle	W R Allman	J P Lynn
2007-08	C Harrison	B P Hindle	W R Allman	J P Lynn
2008-09	W R Allman	B P Hindle	J Crossey	J P Lynn
2009-10	W R Allman	B P Hindle	C Harrison	J P Lynn
2010-11 ⁵	–	B P Hindle	C Harrison	W R Allman

Notes:

- The names are those elected at each AGM which were held in May until 2001; thereafter in October. The Chairman was elected at the first meeting of Council after each AGM.
- C Harrison co-opted October 1999.
- B P Hindle from November 2001.
- J P Lynn co-opted January 2003.
- Trustees of the Charitable Trust. Post of President abolished, Programme Secretary became Lecture Secretary.