Beginnings

The above letter was the spark that lit a waiting heap of kindling and brought the Alliance of Literary Societies into being. The house in Chatham referred to in the letter was No.11, Ordnance Terrace, and it was saved from demolition; it was a childhood home of Charles Dickens. The Alliance still campaigns on behalf of literary heritage, but it is interesting to note that earlier in that year, 1973, Kathleen Adams had visited the Nottingham Dickens Fellowship to give readings from George Eliot’s work, and had also welcomed members of that branch to Arbury, the childhood home of George Eliot, to which she also refers in her letter, and these events may have encouraged her to write her letter to The Times. We
know that several societies’ officers wrote to her, and from her connections with the Brontë Society, the Tennyson Society and the Dickens Fellowship the Alliance was established.

It remained a loose and informal group for some years, sustained by the enthusiasm and hard work of Mrs Adams and her husband Bill alongside other like-minded friends and supporters. Bill acted as secretary of the organisation, and put together the Alliance’s aims and objectives: to act as a liaison body between member societies and as a ‘pressure group’ when needed; to be a referral body with a centre for enquiries; to assist in preserving buildings, places and objects with literary connections; to have the power to issue publications; and to arrange appropriate meetings and suitable social activities. All these continue to be core purposes of the ALS today.

In 1988, some 15 years after its first founding, a meeting was held at the Birmingham and Midland Institute to begin to formalise the organisation, and a seminar was held at the end of April as a launch event. At that stage, the societies attending or registering an interest were: Auden, Brontë, Browning, Lewis Carroll, Caldecott, Chesterton, John Clare, Dickens Fellowship, George Eliot, Gaskell, Hardy, Housman, Richard Jefferies, J.K. Jerome, Johnson, Lamb, Powys, Sterne, Tennyson, Angela Thirkell, Dylan Thomas, Mary Webb, Parson Woodforde, Williamson, the Birmingham Central Literary Association, the Leamington Literary Society, the Solihull Society of Arts, Marlowe, Brett Young, Morris, Kipling and Words of Bromsgrove: 32 in all, although some individuals represented more than one society.

In October 1988, a caretaker committee was appointed, chaired by Joseph Hunt of the Birmingham and Midland Institute, with Herbert (‘Bill’) Woodward as Secretary. Herbert was the Chair of the Birmingham branch of the Dickens Fellowship, but was also a member of the Johnson Society, the Francis Brett Young Society and the Housman Society. Joseph Hunt was also President of the A.E. Housman Society, and a member of several others.

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portraits...I had found my life's work. Some forty portraits later...I found myself President of the Alliance of Literary Societies.'

It was hoped, at that early stage in the life of the ALS, that it would maintain a panel of speakers on literary subjects and would also keep a comprehensive directory of literary societies. The newsletter would be distributed to affiliated societies, and, at first, it was intended that production would be paid for by advertising. *Chapter One* was its title, and Kenn Oultram continued to edit it for 10 years as the ALS's ‘fanzine’ as he liked to refer to it.

### Early Years

The Birmingham and Midland Institute was central to the life of the Alliance in its early phase. Its hosting of the meetings, seminars (as the group AGMs were developed) and social events was crucial, as it enabled delegates from around the country to meet centrally and at minimal cost, although it is clear that there was no intention to tie meetings to the BMI if another venue became more appropriate to the mix of people on the committee. Joseph Hunt, the Chairman, was also Administrator and Librarian of the BMI and was in a position to use its facilities to the benefit of the ALS.

The size of the managing committee was, in the first instance, determined by the number of delegates attending the formal meeting in October 1988 who were prepared to join it; in addition to Joseph Hunt, John Bates, Herbert Woodward and Kenn Oultram, R.A. Browning (Browning Society), Peter Moyse (John Clare Society), Hylton Craig (Dickens Fellowship), Bill Adams (George Eliot Fellowship), Rosemary Pardoe (Ghost Story), Dr James Gibson (Hardy Society), Robin Healey (Charles Lamb Society), R.H. Adams (Pepys Society), R.L. Winstanley (Parson Woodforde Society), and Mrs Joan Leach (Gaskell Society).

Many of these founding member societies are still represented on the ALS committee today; some members were elected *in absentia* but were keen to assist in developing the nascent organisation. Membership of the committee has always depended on the individuals who are prepared to serve on it, rather than on the society they represent. This has helped to keep the committee relevant to different sizes and types of literary society while ensuring a willing and positive group of representatives. Joan Leach served the Gaskell Society and the ALS for many years and is very much missed.

As Kathleen Adams pointed out, the name of the Alliance of Literary Societies already appeared in some directories, and 36 societies had been invited to attend the meeting. Other societies attending included the Brontë Society, the Leamington Literary Society, Welwyn Garden City Literary Society and the Mary Webb Society, setting the pattern of a
mix of single author, groups of authors and general literary societies which still supports the ALS.

Another benefit of the association of the ALS with the BMI was the opportunity to use the BMI account to hold its money, rather than operating separately: this provided some interest. The three officers (Chair, Secretary and Treasurer) were all authorised to sign cheques. At first, the subscription was a flat rate of £5 per society, but this was soon changed to a sliding scale depending on the number of members in each society: from £5 to £20.

Right from the start, the ALS was looking for ways to recruit new member societies. Once Gabriel Woolf had been appointed President and the logo designed, the ALS was ready to advertise itself and promote its potential to literary societies in the UK and abroad.

Whilst the cost of advertising was at this period prohibitive, it is clear that the existence of the ALS became generally known, as the membership gradually increased over its first decade, from a low of about twenty to a total of 90 members by 1999. The willingness of the ALS to provide a grant of up to £50 to smaller (up to 100 members) societies for development projects had attracted interest and several grants were made.

As will be familiar to literary societies everywhere, there were often difficulties in finding delegates who were not too busy to take on the jobs of officers and, until Rosemary Culley took over in 1998, the Secretary post had sometimes been difficult to fill. Bill Adams stepped in when needed, and Helen Newman (chronicler of all our recent AGMs and member of the Richard Jefferies Society) also gave support. The possibility of paying the Secretary was canvassed at this point, but fortunately this was not required. Thelma Thompson took over as treasurer from Bill and, when Joseph Hunt retired as Chairman, Herbert Woodward replaced him, with Kathleen Adams as Vice-Chairman.

The committee fluctuated in size over the period, but the AGM was always well-attended, with delegates from about 30 societies regularly attending it. When Thelma retired as Treasurer, Julie Shorland took over and has remained in the post ever since. Robin Healey did a stint as Publicity Officer and appealed to the societies for methods of attracting publicity; this has also been a long-term issue for literary societies.

Important matters addressed by the ALS included public liability insurance; the availability of and application for grants of support; the possibilities of sponsorship and the availability of work experience and volunteering as support for literary societies. It is evident that many of the member societies were looking for ways to attract investment and improve their financial situation, in order to continue in existence for the benefit of their members and to provide
more and more satisfying activities and promotions. There is little evidence from the period that the literary heritage itself was under threat: indeed, there were initiatives such as book weeks and festivals which suggest that the environment for literary societies was relatively benign but, at the time, there was also a renewed enthusiasm for literature on which the societies wished to build.

The possibility of providing block insurance for all the member societies was thoroughly explored by the ALS, but there was no economical way it could be done. It became evident also that the kinds of funding available to literary societies were extremely limited, as lottery funding was only available for capital projects and Arts Council funding was directed to creative projects rather than heritage preservation.

Throughout the first 10 years of the ALS it published the glossy *Chapter One*, edited by Kenn Oultram, as its official newsletter. This was relatively expensive to produce but was funded mainly by the advertising which included literary festivals and competitions as well as the societies themselves. It came out only once a year and was therefore limited in its potential for publicising the societies’ meetings and events, so there was sometimes a ‘diary’ of events also distributed as a photocopied sheet. There was debate among the committee as to whether it would be better to go for a cheaper, more frequent newsletter or to retain the more professional, high quality publication, but Kenn decided that 10 years as Editor was long enough and *Chapter One* ceased in 1999, to be replaced by two different publications: an ALS handbook of information which included tips and advice for member societies, which could be distributed to and through the societies, and a more creative publication. The latter was entitled *The Open Book* and was edited by Thelma Thompson.

This first period of the formal existence of the ALS can be characterised by its growing membership, consolidation of its practices (twice-yearly meetings and an AGM) and a growing awareness of the needs of its constituency. The AGM had developed into the major event in the ALS calendar and the habit of one society ‘hosting’ the meeting at the BMI and providing talks and discussions had also emerged. The afternoon of the AGM usually included a group of readings by Gabriel Woolf and it is clear that this was a considerable attraction for delegates.

**The Start of the New Millennium**

An issue which emerged early in the new millennium was the desire of single author societies to have buildings associated with their author adorned with a blue plaque. As with many other issues, the Blue Plaque scheme, now run by English Heritage, has its own web presence, and helpful information is available there. It seems that societies want to publicise
their author’s and their own existence, and this is one relatively straightforward way of doing so, although there are restrictions as to where such plaques can be positioned if they are provided within the scheme. For those societies unable to obtain Blue Plaques, there are now alternative plaques which can be purchased via the Internet – and erected as long as the relevant permissions are acquired.

The Publicity Officer of the ALS, Robin Healey, was keen to get the ALS into the newspapers and/or on radio, but then as now this was not an easy task. However, with the growth of social media and an active web presence, the form of publicity has shifted.

The Constitution of the ALS was revised in 2000 to bring it up-to-date with recent changes. The date of the AGM was to be moved to May/June in order to enable the Treasurer to complete the accounts. This suggests that there was now considerable business involved in running the ALS, making the accounts more time-consuming for Julie Shorland. The new publication, *The Open Book*, was just getting into its stride and, fortunately for the ALS, nobody else was using the title!

Both Bill and Kathleen Adams appeared at the AGM in 2000, and were enthusiastically thanked for their continued support for the organisation they had founded. Herbert Woodward had died during the year and, for the first time, the Dickens Fellowship was not represented at the AGM.

Gabriel Woolf had served the ALS for a total of 12 years (four three-year stints) and decided to step down in 2001. Several notable people whom Gabriel had recommended were approached to replace him, but the novelist Susan Hill was the first to make a positive reply, being appointed for one year in the first instance. A further change was the move for the committee to the Carr’s Lane Church Centre. This was cheaper and more accessible for local transport than the BMI, and the meeting rooms were very pleasant.

New societies and more long-standing members were keen to host the AGM, and the first new-style annual meeting was held at Ledbury, hosted by the Friends of the Dymock Poets. The ALS Handbook, a loose-leaf collection of material relating to the running of literary societies, was put together and distributed to all the members, thoroughly subsidised by the enthusiasm and hard work of the committee. Peter Barton of the Walmsley Society had been Chairman for two years with the support of Rosemary Culley (Secretary) and Julie Shorland (Treasurer), but stepped down in 2001 due to ill-health. One of the challenges for literary societies is the turnover of officers and committee members who tend to be of mature years, although literary interests seem to be correlated with longevity in the case of many
ALS delegates! Nicholas Reed of the E. Nesbit Society took over as Chairman, and the committee members from 2001 onwards remained relatively stable.

The ALS website appeared, thanks to Rosemary Culley, and was attracting over 23,000 visitors by early 2002. Other initiatives in the period include an essay competition, sponsored by the David Thomas Charitable Trust; the addition of entertainments and trips to the AGM, which was developing into a literary weekend; and the establishment of The Open Book as a more journal-like publication, now to be joined by a regular newsletter appearing twice a year. The possibility of applying for charitable status was raised, with the view that only if a majority of the member societies were charities would it be appropriate for the ALS to apply. At the time, the ALS income was large enough to qualify if it was decided to go down that route.

At the end of her term of office as President, Susan Hill was succeeded by Aeronwy Thomas, daughter of Dylan Thomas. Other changes of significance included the retirement of Nicholas Reed, after some five years as Chairman, and Rosemary Culley’s retirement from the post of Secretary. They had helped the ALS through years of growth and consolidation and the confidence to increase the subscription to a realistic level, given the range of benefits societies were receiving from membership, including the web site, the various publications and the opportunities to meet and discuss issues of importance such as fundraising, legal obligations and publishing.

Aeronwy Thomas proved to be an enthusiastic and supportive President of the ALS. Herself a poet, she thrilled her audiences as a reader of her own and her father’s poetry, and her death in the summer of 2009 (she was unable to attend the AGM that year) was a great loss to the organisation. Linda Curry took over as Chair on Nicholas Reed’s retirement, and Rosemary Culley was such a hard act to follow that there was a hiatus of about a year before the post of Secretary was filled by Anita Fernandez-Young at the AGM hosted at Swindon by the Richard Jefferies Society. In the meantime, Linda set up a new, simplified website for the ALS. Julie Shorland as Treasurer helped to ensure continuity during this period of change.

A new phase could be detected with the holding of 2009’s ALS AGM in Dublin, its first overseas meeting. The Dubliners Literary Society had become a feature of the AGM weekends, bringing a delightful Celtic ambiance to the celebration dinners and a sharp humour to the meetings. They were initially reluctant to host the weekend but once the committee had arranged the hotel and meeting rooms, Desmond O’Malley and Michael Murray rallied their troops and gave the ALS a most entertaining, memorable and enlightening weekend. A sequence of great weekends followed: at Knutsford hosted by the
Gaskell Society; Lichfield hosted by the Johnson Society; Nottingham hosted by the Dickens Fellowship; the 40th Anniversary weekend at St Hilda’s College Oxford, hosted by the Barbara Pym Society; and, in 2014, the Marlowe Society in Canterbury.

These events illustrate how the ALS was developing as a communications centre for literary societies and a hub for discussion, as well as a focus for the promotion of literary societies in general and particular. The AGM was an opportunity for each society to showcase its speakers and its expertise and to encourage interchange of members and the sheer enjoyment of literary life and activities.

The new journal of the ALS, ALSo, emerged from the hands of Linda Curry and (initially) Robin Healey. The A5 format, in the striking red and white cover, became a familiar product to member societies and developed its own distinctive style. Two copies were distributed to each society annually (with the possibility of buying extra copies). In order to widen its audience within societies, it also became available in electronic format. Today, the journal is only available electronically – emailed to member societies and also downloadable from the website. A theme is chosen each year and announced at the AGM so that every society has an opportunity to encourage its members to offer a contribution of around 1,000 words. Topics so far have included: censorship and copyright; literary tourism, beyond text; regional writing; lost in translation; fashion in literature; humour in literature; and the literary fantastic. ALSo both showcases the societies whose authors provide the meat of the papers and develops readers’ knowledge and understanding of literary topics; some printed back copies can be bought from the Editor, Linda Curry, and electronic copies downloaded from the website.

In addition to the journal, once the new Secretary had settled in to the role, the newsletter was revived. This is sent out as an electronic file to all societies with email addresses, to be distributed to their members, twice a year. The newsletter contains calls for papers, snippets of news, and most importantly, campaigns in which societies were involved.

After Aeronwy’s death, there was considerable discussion in committee about who should be approached as her successor. The ALS was fortunate in attracting Jenny Uglow, author and biographer; her wide and deep knowledge of many of the member societies’ authors and her practical experience of the publishing world, the respect in which she is held by writers and readers, give her a unique place in today’s literary life.

A further development was the production of booklets of guidance, produced by the ALS committee. These are intended to give societies confidence in managing their affairs, and represent the experience of many different societies distilled into short handbooks. Their
titles are: Forming a Literary Society (this includes a model constitution, for societies in the early years of operation); Marketing Your Literary Society (includes a member survey); Finance and Accounting for Literary Societies (includes advice on fundraising); Organising Events and Festivals for Literary Societies (help with organising the paperwork); and Publishing for Literary Societies (a guide to what can be done at different levels of complexity). More of these are anticipated as different issues are raised by member societies; they are now available on the website.

In addition, the ALS began to produce bookmarks annually, with information about the ALS on one side and a promotion for the AGM-hosting society on the other. These are professionally designed and printed and have proved hugely popular with delegates at the AGMs. As a companion to the bookmark, a threefold leaflet was produced which explains what the ALS does and with a list of member societies helps to promote itself and them. Marty Ross Smith, the then Publicity Officer, was responsible for these developments.

Linda Curry, in her capacity as chairman, was contacted by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Literarischer Gesellschaften und Gedenkstätten (ALG) and attended a meeting in Berlin in 2009, contributing to the publication which subsequently emerged. This was an opportunity to meet with similar organisations across Europe and exchange perspectives on the funding of literary heritage. The ALS was not alone in being self-funded, but there was evidence that in some European countries public money was being used to support buildings and organisations and the cultural exchange of which the European literary heritage is a part. However, the research project which had stimulated this and further meetings came to an end and the ALG has reverted to managing just the German literary heritage. Although it was a disappointment that no long term literary network was developed from this tentative beginning, it was useful to make contact with the European activists and discover their concerns.

In the UK, the ALS met with the Royal Society of Literature, which has interests quite different from but complementary to the ALS. These initiatives were part of a strategy which concentrated on developing a public profile for the ALS, trying to ensure that issues of concern to member societies are not ignored. The organisation for literary houses in the UK, LitHouses, is another group with which the ALS maintains good relations, some member societies being members of LitHouses via their literary properties.

2015 Onwards

Although the core of the committee remains unchanged, we have had some new faces, and Marty Ross took over from Anita as Secretary in 2016. She has been busy growing our links
with the RSL and LitHouses as well as developing new ones with organisations such as *Slightly Foxed* and the Friends of the National Libraries.

In 2016, Claire Harman succeeded Jenny Uglow as President, and is proving to be a stalwart supporter. Claire has written five major literary biographies – on Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, Fanny Burney, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Sylvia Townsend Warner.

The 2015 AGM was hosted by the Trollope Society, in York. That was followed by the Brontë Society in Haworth, and the Siegfried Sassoon Fellowship and Wilfred Owen Association jointly in Edinburgh. The 45th Anniversary weekend in 2018 is a return to Birmingham (where we started), with speakers on writers with local connections (Brett Young, Housman, Jerome K. Jerome, and Tolkien).

*ALSo* topics during this period have been: literary places; literary scandal; lost, found or faked; and the unreliable narrator. Copies continue to be available for download via the website.

More recently, the newsletter has been undergoing rapid change, focussing on topical subjects and moving items like calls for papers and events onto the website and into social media. The editing has been taken over by Cally Phillips who is also now managing the new website. She is brimming with ideas to re-energise both the website and the newsletter, as well as using MailChimp to distribute occasional news ‘flashes’ – aimed at improving ALS engagement with its members.

Jodie Robson runs our social media presence. Her literary advent calendar on Facebook was very well received.

**Where are we now? Where are we going?**

The ALS is in good heart 45 years after Kathleen Adams’ letter to *The Times*. It has over 120 members, of which some are general literary societies, some ‘multiple’ societies celebrating groups of authors rather than individuals, some ‘friends of’ and the remaining bulk are single author societies. The majority of the societies has memberships of up to 500, with the remainder including some of the very large societies of over 1,000 members. At any one time, the membership of all the member societies together numbers at least 50,000. This is a very considerable constituency, and one which, although not competing with the National Trust at four million, is nevertheless a very substantial one, given that the ALS and most of the member societies are run entirely by volunteers. Of the member societies, most have locations of some sort which are important to them; some are birthplaces such as
Haworth (Brontë), or residences such as Chawton (Jane Austen) or Batemans (Kipling), some are regions of England such as Dorset (Hardy) or the Lake District (Beatrix Potter), often containing houses or other buildings (schools, farms, churches) with which the authors are associated. Dr Johnson’s birthplace in Lichfield is one focus for a society honouring him; his house in London is another. In some cases the literary society owns and operates the property, in others the property belongs to a separate trust or to a local authority.

The ALS provides advice and support to societies wrestling with the purchase or management of such properties or the reluctance of local authorities to respect or fund the literary heritage of which they are possessed. The committee is fortunate to include in its number Janet Allan of the Gaskell Society who was instrumental in the purchase and restoration of Plymouth Grove, the home of the Gaskells in Manchester, by the Manchester Historic Buildings Trust.

The internet has transformed the operation of the ALS by enabling communication with members to be carried out electronically at virtually no cost, although we still have a small number of societies which prefer to maintain hard copy communication and we are always happy to accommodate them. There are still two committee meetings a year at which the business is transacted, as well as the AGM weekend. Many societies have overseas branches or members, which means that the ALS’s influence flows around the globe. Among the membership are societies which are largely academic, but the main support for literary societies worldwide is from enthusiasts of all kinds. Many people are members of more than one society, while others relish the variety offered by belonging to a general literary society. Through the bookmarks and leaflets the ALS presence is felt at literary events but its real influence is achieved through its membership.

New societies join every year; some rejoin after a lapse; and some, sadly, run out of members or organisers and drop out of existence. The Beddoes Society closed in recent years, but made a very generous donation from its assets to the ALS. It was one of the earliest societies to join. Although some of the largest societies are represented on the committee, they do not dominate it, but have fortunately been able to give it stability over the last 45 years. Any society wishing to provide a delegate to the committee is urged to consider this; the group meets in Birmingham, so access to the city is desirable.

The future of the ALS seems assured by its growth, financial stability and the enthusiasm of the membership. However, there will be challenges to be met. There are literary societies which choose not to join, and it may be that what the ALS offers is not suitable to their needs. The challenge now is to sustain growth and respond to the needs of organisations which increasingly use electronic means of communication and social media as their
environment, while not losing sight of the constituency which by its very nature dwells in the past – even our 20th century authors are now ‘last century’ rather than contemporary.

The ALS meeting agendas now always include ‘campaigns’ as a reminder to all members to raise any and all concerns they may have about the safety of properties and artefacts associated with the literary heritage, thus echoing the origins of the organisation in Kathleen Adams’ letter of 1973. Although the ALS has always lent its voice to campaigns for literary properties under threat, it is also taking on board other literary-related campaigns: predominantly that of the closure of local authority libraries and museums, impacting not only on readers and local communities but also on access to literary collections housed in those buildings.

Even if the ALS is not called upon this year or next year to press those in power, whether local, regional or national, to respect the wishes of individual societies, the stronger it becomes as an organisation the better it will be equipped to promote its members. It is not a registered charity. Most of its members are not, and the benefits of charitable status would not greatly assist it. Its subscriptions are modest but its reach is considerable and the advantages of membership can be valuable.

However, the advantage of being fully independent and self-funding is enormous at a time when all external funding is being cut. The programme of publications, the provision of a website full of information and the annual organisation of an important literary meeting all coincide to give the ALS sufficient substance to serve its member societies as its founders would have wished.

Sadly, in 2016, Bill Adams died, shortly followed by Kathleen. However, their legacy goes from strength to strength, and we hope they would be proud of our growth.