

# SOCIETIES

## The Lancashire Authors' Association

*Eric Holt*

In 1909 a group of Lancashire writers met in Rochdale to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the acknowledged father of Lancashire Dialect writers, John Collier, better known in Lancashire literary circles as Tim Bobbin.

The meeting was ostensibly intended as a one-off, arranged for a specific purpose and not to be repeated. However, one of the writers – a very prolific, well known and well respected one – suggested that it would be a good thing if some kind of formal group could be convened to foster the interest in Lancashire writings. The writer was Allen Clarke, pen-name Teddy Ashton, whose talents embraced dialect poetry and stories, journalism, novels, local history pamphlets – in fact, anything concerning the written word. Any suggestion by Allen Clarke on the subject of writing had to be taken seriously, and so it was that the meeting approved of the idea. Thus the seed that became the Lancashire Authors' Association was sown.

The early days of the LAA, as it is known to its members, were not without problems. Meetings were haphazard, membership was unrecorded, and people joined and left on a whim. There was very little money in the kitty and the possibility of survival looked decidedly grim. Then, in 1911, one courageous member gave a forceful resumé of the Association's failings which stunned the gathering at a meeting. He pointed out that there was no proper constitution, no regular organised meetings, no fixed subscriptions, and that there was need of a more streamlined committee than the existing unwieldy group of twenty.

After the initial shock and doubtless embarrassment, the wheels began to turn, ensuring that the LAA was set on the proper footing it enjoys today. Another addition to the features of the Association was the introduction of a regularly-produced journal, *The Record*. This was to contain news of activities, notices of meetings and writings by members. It also became a means by which contact could be maintained, for it must be noted that the LAA never had a fixed meeting place until very recently, moving around from town to town, almost in travelling circus style.



Lancashire authors and friends. Taken at the 'Tim Bobbin' bi-centenary celebration at Rochdale in April 1909

The attack on the complacency of the founders of the Association acted as a wake-up call, measures being taken to put things on a proper, organised footing. A constitution was agreed and drawn up, subscription fees set at two shillings (10p) for men and a shilling (5p) for women, and a future programme planned. The committee was pruned to a few dedicated workers, and a secretary/treasurer was appointed. The Lancashire Authors' Association was on the move. A glance at the first year's accounts, presented in September 1910, show that finances were, indeed, very slim. Subscriptions realised £15 5s 6d (£15.27). After all expenses had been met, the princely sum of £2 12s 0d (£2.60) was carried forward. An interesting fact was that the secretary's expenses for the year were a mere five shillings (25p). The present secretary would be happy to report such a figure.

During the ensuing years membership increased, due mainly to word-of-mouth endorsement, and reports in the local press. In those early years there was a large number of weekly newspapers, each town having its own journal, in addition to the larger evening and daily issues. The opportunities for being published were much more apparent than in the present time. Many writers making up the LAA membership had regular columns and features in their towns' news sheets.

A feature of the early days of the Association was the fact that many quarterly meetings were held in town halls and other civic buildings. For the Lancashire Authors' Association to visit a town was almost in the nature of a royal visitation. The local mayor, mayoress and other civic dignitaries would be present, and proceedings were very formal

indeed. It must be remembered that the early membership of the LAA was very elitist. After all, it was made up of writers, highly intelligent and well respected, in the days when education was not as widespread and all-embracing as it later became. Today, in common with the majority of similar societies, the Association is much more egalitarian.

This came about in some way when the committee decided to recruit members who were not specifically writers but were 'Lovers of Lancashire Literature and History', as is the theme to this day. The outlook of the Association was broadened from then on, a practise which continues and will do so for as long as the LAA is in existence.

In 1921 a decision was made to found a library, and the first catalogue produced a year later listed 350 titles. For many years the library was housed in Manchester Public Library, and then transferred to Preston in 1982. It is now in a room in Accrington Central Library on St James Street. Over the years the library has grown, as books have been purchased and many others donated. The criterion for being accepted for the library is that the books should have a Lancashire content, or have been written by Lancashire-born writers. The library now forms a significant collection of Lancashire literature, and is available for home loans to members. Non-members may inspect volumes for reference on receiving permission from library staff.

Over the years, a number of well known figures have graced the membership of the Association. Many were known only in the county, but nationally-recognised names were Wilfred Pickles, Richmal Crompton of *Just William* fame, and the inimitable Dame Gracie Fields. Lancashire dialect writing has always held a special place in the LAA. Many of the county's finest dialect experts have been proud to be a part of a real Lancashire organisation.

In 1992 the Lancashire Dialect Society was having great difficulty in continuing to operate. The reasons were many. Although the membership numbers remained high, attendance at meetings was minimal, and no one seemed willing to undertake the running of the society. The chairman and one or two other dedicated workers decided to call it a day,



approaching the LAA with a suggestion that they take over their membership list, their funds and their library. At a joint meeting of the executives, the merger was finalised and the Dialect Society members were offered a year's free membership of the LAA, with the option to continue afterwards. Sadly very few continued when the free membership finished, possibly because the ethos of the Association did not meet with their needs. The books from the Dialect Society were added to the LAA library, duplicates being sold off.

In 1937 two silver cups were presented to the Association to be awarded to the winners of literary competitions, the Batty Cup for Standard English poem, and the Scholes Cup for Lancashire dialect poem. From these small beginnings the Association now organises nine competitions, embracing all branches of writing, standard English in poetry, short stories, articles and prose, with local history articles. In each case a trophy is presented to the winners to be held for one year, certificates being presented to first, second and third. In addition the writer of the piece judged to be the best of the winners, in a sense the *Victor Ludorum*, receives the Handley-Taylor Rose Bowl with a prize-money cheque. At present the prize money of £40 is from the interest generated from the Lady Hulton Memorial Fund.

This fund was set up in 1997 by Mrs Judy Cooke, sister of Lady Hulton, the wife of Sir Geoffrey Hulton of the Hulton Estate on the boundaries of Atherton, Westhoughton and Bolton. When Lady Hulton died, having suffered from Alzheimer's Disease for a number of years, Mrs Cooke thought that she should be remembered as a staunch Lancastrian, if not by birth then by adoption. She approached the Association and the outcome was a fund which Mrs Cooke diligently gathered together and presented to the LAA with the interest becoming the Lady Hulton Award. Should the Association cease to continue, the capital from the fund will be donated to the Alzheimer's Society.

*The Record*, the journal of the Association, is published quarterly, containing writings by members, reports of meetings and items of news. The Annual General Meeting is held in March. Presently there are three meetings arranged annually, the AGM and October meetings in Chorley, and a June meeting in Lytham St Annes. At each meeting, other than the AGM, there is a speaker at the afternoon session, while the evening is given over to entertainment by members. Over the lifetime of the LAA, there has been an enduring tradition for good friendly gatherings, and many talented raconteurs, singers and storytellers have given pleasure to their fellow members.

The Lancashire Authors' Association has been in existence for 97 years. In common with many similar organisations it is a sad fact that the membership is getting older, unfortunately not being replaced by

new, younger blood. How long it will carry on is in the lap of the gods, but it is unlikely that anyone will equal the record of our longest serving member, Mrs Edith Wormleighton, wife of a former president, the late George Wormleighton. She joined as a young girl in 1931, a total of 73 years unbroken membership. She must have found something worthwhile in the LAA.

Anyone who would be interested in joining or would like to know more can contact:

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Subscriptions are: £10 per annum (single), £13 per annum (joint).

It must be stressed that the Lancashire Authors' Association is not just for writers. It is for all who are interested in the literature, history, and traditions of the County Palatine. One thing is certain, newcomers can be sure of a gradely welcome.