

The Book Society AGM 2025

Chair's Report from Lisa Milton 20/5/2025

Well, what a year it has been. Starting my tenure in July last year, we found ourselves in an untenable position. We had two more dinners booked at The Conduit Club for the Autumn, but with the addition of the room hire fee, we knew that we would not be able to continue to pay this sum in 2025. Finding a new venue was our number one priority. Our dinners were getting lower ticket sales and our cashflow was bad - we were at risk of running out of money. There was an added underlying risk that the Conduit might go out of business, taking our down payments with them. Membership numbers were ok, but the committee felt strongly that we needed to focus on diversifying our membership, making sure we bring in new members who are more representative of the industry today and who are the leaders of the future.

Amanda Harris joined the Committee as Vice Chair, and we were thrilled to also welcome David Headley, Philip Jones, and Truda Spruyt to the Committee. Thank you to them for helping fellow committee members: Jonathan Paterson (Treasurer), Cathryn Summerhayes, Jamie Hodder-Williams, Emma Shercliff and Hermione Ireland (Secretary) navigate a complex, busy workload.

With feedback from members, we knew that we needed to find a new central venue with no sharing plates or room hire, and that could accommodate around 80 guests for dinner and crucially, with better and more affordable wine choices. It felt like an almost impossible task. However, Truda asked her team to do further research and was able to present Browns as an option for our new venue. After a visit and lots of discussion, we decided to trial Browns for two Spring 2025 dinners. Our first dinner was a sellout, and indeed was such a success, that with 79 attendees, it felt a little squeezed in the room. Feedback however was unanimous. The food and service was excellent, the wine much better and better priced. The microphone was a bit scratchy, and they only had two, but we made it work. Additionally, the networking at the beginning was too cramped to be able to talk to anyone. From our second dinner onwards, we've secured an extra room for the pre-dinner drinks. We will probably also reduce the food selection to make service easier.

With such great feedback, we've now confirmed Browns as our venue for our two Autumn dinners on the 16th of September and 4th of November.

To help build our cash, we had to decide to increase our membership fees from £55 to £60, but we did so without any complaints and minimum disruption. Initially, we had thought we would not have sufficient funds to donate the usual £1.5k to The Book Trade Charity, and so invited them to come to our Christmas Party to raise funds. They were pleased to do so and collaborated with Jo to create a raffle. Donations on the night were £800. With good ticket sales for our Autumn dinners as well as clever cost management of our party, we were also able to honour our £1.5k donation. I'd love to invite the charity back next year to do the same - it's so important to give back and I feel we were all happy to do so.

David Headley very kindly offered to host a party at no cost to the Society to help build our cash. David sourced wine sponsorship, we offered pizza, sold 90 tickets for £20 each and only had the cost of the pizza (and we ordered far too much). Thank you to David and his team, who are also generously hosting our second party tonight. This is something we are thrilled David wants to continue to do and really helps build cash in the bank. In time, we hope to have enough money to return to sponsorship for dinners and membership.

Our guest speakers have been incredible, and we are truly grateful to them. Thank you to Kate Mosse and Felicity Blunt, Katie Espiner, Fleur Sinclair and David Taylor. Each very different, each creating space for us to think about how we work together as an industry to drive book sales and build readers, profit and equity.

Suffice it to say we are very grateful to Truda for helping us to find and secure the new venue, and to Jo Dawson for all the time-consuming negotiations and for making the move look – and feel – easy.

Looking forward, we need to continue to diversify and build our membership. We'd like to survey our members to also make sure we know where they sit across the industry and to help understand and improve our representation. Equally, we need to maintain the quality of our guest speakers, keep the balance of dinners and parties, find ways to engage with those who are our future members and make sure we are as relevant and important in 200 years as we are today.

On the 24th of June we have our Summer Party at The October Gallery hosted by our President Amanda Ridout, I hope many of you can join us and bring guests to introduce them to this incredible society. I will now hand it over to Amanda Harris as our new chair who I know will do a brilliant job with David and naturally the Committee will support her.

Lisa Milton
Chair 2024-2025