

British Entertainment History Project

Draft criteria: Members, Volunteers, Community Members

Supporters

For thirty years we have generally referred to anyone who has supported or played a role in the History Project as a 'member' of the Project. This was fine when the organisation was relatively informal. However now that we are incorporated as a company, we have Articles of Association which commit us to a very different, tightly-defined status of (capital-M) 'Member'. We should not therefore continue to use the word in the old, loose, open-ended way.

At the same time, we want to retain the welcoming community that we've built up over the years, for which we still need a single, all-encompassing word.

I suggest that from now on we refer to anyone who shows an enthusiasm for the History Project as a 'Supporter'. This would mean that our regular, all-inclusive monthly meetings could continue as 'Supporters' Meetings'. And we should continue to encourage all Supporters to register with the website so as to get enhanced read-only access to its content.

This will carry forward the spirit of the History Project as it has existed until now.

However, this still leaves us with three other categories which appear in the Articles of Association, and which we need to define. These are:

- Community Members;
- Volunteers;
- Members.

Community Members

Community Members are referred to in the Articles as individuals whose education, training and skills we should facilitate, so that they can play an active role in the Project (Article 4:5).

There is no suggestion that we have a duty actively to seek out or recruit Community Members. But when they identify themselves, and express an interest in playing a role, we should provide a supportive environment.

All Supporters are potential Community Members: the distinction simply depends on their level of activity. It seems to me that a Supporter is someone who wishes the Project well and maybe turns up for the odd meeting or makes

a donation; while a Community Member takes a further step by making some sort of practical contribution - helping with interviews, digitising material, etc.

Volunteers

Volunteers are individuals who take yet another step in their level of activity and commitment.

According to the Articles, we have an obligation to facilitate the education, training and skills of Volunteers (4:5). And we also have a duty to “engage and mentor” them, specifically with regard to their contribution to our digital assets and website (4:7).

I take this to mean that with Volunteers, the History Project should be more pro-active: we should seek them out (e.g. via universities, colleges, community organisations); ensure that they have an appropriate initial body of skills; and put in place a formal relationship, including a mentor and mentoring process, so that they have a rewarding educational experience.

We need a clear procedure for identifying and inviting potential Volunteers.

Members

It should be clear from the paragraphs above that it is perfectly possible to play a very active role in the History Project – including setting up and conducting interviews, digitising and uploading content, adding to and editing material on the website – as a Volunteer or Community Member. None of these activities requires an individual to be a ‘Member’ as defined by the Articles of Association.

The status of Member, as defined by the Articles, is not about the technical or creative development of the collection. It is about the management of the company, the right to vote at the AGM/EGMs, to elect Directors, and to seek election as a Director.

These are significant powers which could, in principle, be used to damage the Project’s collection and reputation. Consequently, the Articles place a duty on the Directors to act as responsible gate-keepers in assessing each application to become a Member.

I suggest that qualifications to become a Member should include, as a minimum:

- A proven commitment to the History Project – e.g. a prior relationship going back at least 2 years, including attendance at Supporters Meetings on at least 5 occasions in the last 2 years.

- Previous experience of managerial or executive decision making in other contexts – e.g. employment, other companies, other formally constituted voluntary organisations.
- A pledge to act at all times in the interest of the History Project and its collection, upholding its principles of comprehensiveness, independence and open access.

The Articles state that an application to become a Member must be submitted in writing. I suggest we streamline this by drawing up a standard application form which addresses the bullet points above. The form might also reiterate that becoming a Member is only one form of participation in the Project, and that much of the practical work is carried out by Volunteers and Community Members.

I believe it is an urgent priority for the Directors to draw up this application form, and to agree a list of Supporters who should be invited to apply to become Members.

However paradoxical it may seem, I believe the current Directors should also submit written applications to become Members in order to regularise their own status. The Articles state that in order to become a Director, an individual must first be a Member. Companies House procedures logically require that the first group of 'Founding Directors' are uniquely obliged to become Directors before they are Members – but I believe we should act to resolve that anomaly as quickly as possible.

Website access

We should encourage everyone - Members, Volunteers, Community Members, Supporters – to register with the website in order to get enhanced read-only-access to its content.

However, for those seeking edit-access to the website, more safeguards are required. I'm aware that Ian and Alison regularly back up so that we are unlikely irrevocably to lose the whole collection. But we still have a duty to minimise the risk of malicious or accidental harm which may take the website offline for a period of time, with consequent damage to our reputation.

I suggest we draw up a written Access Agreement for all individuals seeking edit-access. This should define the scope of the access; set out basic responsibilities (e.g. don't share your password); and require the individual to undertake to act responsibly and to support the History Project's objectives. For Volunteers with edit-access, the Agreement should also specify their Mentor and details of the mentoring relationship.

Meetings

It follows from everything above that we should adjust our current meetings procedure.

The existing monthly (2 pm) meetings should continue, as Supporters Meetings. Their function would be to exchange information, report back on recent work, and make practical arrangements for work in progress, fundraising initiatives etc. But they would not have the power to set policy for the Project.

The existing monthly (1 pm) management meetings should continue, but from now on they should be convened, conducted and minuted as Directors' meetings. Non-Directors may also be invited to attend and contribute to discussion, but only Directors would have a vote. These meetings would have the power to set policy for the Project, to the extent set down in the Articles.

There must be an Annual General Meeting, open only to Members, at which Directors are elected / re-elected, and other AGM business as set down in the Articles is dealt with.

In addition the Articles allow for Extraordinary General Meetings, open only to Members.

Martin Spence
27th June 2017