

Friends in the UK – a developing enterprise

Daniel Ferguson, executive director, Friends of Libraries Australia Inc. (FOLA)

A recent visit to the United Kingdom highlighted developments in Friends of Library groups throughout the country. Friends are contributing significantly to the national resurgence in cultural activities, in particular, libraries, art galleries, museums, but also cathedrals and concert venues.

A wide range of institutions have active and successful Friends groups. Those visited included, Friends of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Tate Modern and Britain, Wigmore Hall, Ashmolean Museum, Royal Academy, Royal Opera House, St James Church Piccadilly, Bath Abbey, Norwich and Lincoln Cathedral, the British Museum and the British Library.

Some of these friends groups have in recent years made a significant contribution in marketing their institution to a previously untapped public. They have become a vital part of the institution's strategic planning, and have contributed significantly to the business development and revenue base of the institution. Friends of Norwich Cathedral, for example, established in 1930, have raised more than £2.5 million in the past ten years and are undertaking a computerised digital monitoring system in the Cathedral.

Convent Garden Friends publicity states '...The Royal Opera House can only continue to provide world-class opera and ballet with the support and altruism of The Friends'. One may suspect that such support negates government and other forms of 'base' funding. Not so. Both these institutions have undertaken considerable building projects in the past five years, with funding coming from the government. The Friends have added to government funding with, and not at the expense of, such support.

Key stakeholders in library service provision also recognise the contribution being made by friends groups throughout the country. Ten years ago there were fewer than fifty groups. Today there are more than 300 library friends groups.

The most high profile group is the Friends of the British Library, where I had the opportunity to meet with the deputy chairman, Dr Colin Tite and the administrator of the Friends, Geoffrey Newman. The Friends Room is a large well furnished room situated on the third floor and overlooking the impressive King's Library (the collection of George III) housed in a six story seventeen-metre glass walled tower.

A meeting with Jill Wright, director, *The Library Campaign* and Andrew Coburn, secretary, at the Library Association headquarters, provided an update on the nationwide development



Andrew Coburn, secretary of *The Library Campaign*; Jill Wright, director of *The Library Campaign*; and Daniel Ferguson, FOLA at the headquarters of the Library Association in London

with Friends of Library groups. The *Library Campaign* is an umbrella organisation representing the interests of Friends of Library groups in the United Kingdom. Together with *Libraries for Life for Londoners*, these two organisations provide a similar function to FOLA in Australia.

Earlier in the year, at a meeting held at the House of Commons, plans were put in place to form an umbrella group representing all friends of libraries groups in the United Kingdom. Much of the impetus for this development and the awakening of friends in the United Kingdom is the result of a report undertaken by Capital Planning Information Ltd, headed by Geoffrey Smith, a former county chief librarian. This report was one of many undertaken by the Library and Information Commission on behalf of the government. It is having a significant impact on future directions of library and information services in the United Kingdom.

Some of the outcomes of this visit and implications for FOLA and Friends groups in Australia, have been:

- a closer liaison has been established with peak bodies representing friends groups in the United Kingdom;
- a commitment to pursue the friends movement with bodies such as IFLA, thus strengthening the relationship between the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australian friends of library bodies; and
- continuing the liaison with the Library Association and library educators across the United Kingdom.

Friends of library groups can help public libraries to achieve their potential as community assets, both well funded and community supported this is appreciated by stakeholders in the cultural sector in the United Kingdom today.

The opportunity to revisit a variety of Friends groups both in libraries and other cultural institutions has given FOLA and myself an appreciation of trends in another country and some of the challenges for the development of Friends groups in Australia. ■