

**Minutes of the  
Inaugural Meeting of the Scythe Association of Great Britain and Ireland**

Date: 15<sup>th</sup> January 2011

Venue: 23 Chiswell Road, Oxford

Attendees: Simon Fairlie, Gemma Suggitt, Phil Batten, Derek Wells, Ian Pettman, Richard Brown, Mike Ingram, Chris Riley (acting chair), Steve Tomlin, John Letts, Mark Allery (minutes)

On opening (1.40pm) the meeting thanked John for his hospitality in offering the venue and food.

Being the inaugural meeting there are no previous minutes, no existing organisation and no officers. Chris offered to act as temporary chairman for the meeting and Mark offered to take the minutes.

**[1] Is there a need for an Association, and if so what for?**

Experiences with comparable organisations were discussed with a view to using the best practice for the potential association.

Steve provided some information on the Austrian Scythe Association (the Sensenverein). The Austrian association provides both training and equipment through the association. It has an information stall for events and is collecting historical information. Three people are paid, the chair (who runs the shop), the archivist and the secretary was paid (part time). Their membership fee is 10euro a year, and there are invitations to events and an annual dinner. The association takes a percentage (a third) of course fees, but found it hard to get sponsorship from industry. Teachers also get commission on equipment sold on their courses. There were 233 members in 2010. It has been running since about 2004-2005.

Steve said that Christiane Lechner had reported that the impact of the Sensenveiren was very positive in promoting the use of the scythe in Austria, and in influencing the blade manufacturer Schrockenfux. 28 events a year and 24 courses had been supported .

Mark described the Association of Polelathes Turners and Greenwood Workers which has around 650 members and has been in existence for around 21 years. The organisation is relatively small and meets only 3 times a year, with voluntary committee members. The organisation published the Bodgers Gazette and holds the Bodgers Ball every year. The bodgers website is self funding through advertising and hosts a forum which is open to all. The website also accepts membership by paypal. The national organisation is complemented by active local groups, but all of this takes active members to run them. This year the 21<sup>st</sup> Bodgers Ball will be held in Herefordshire and Steve (with Mark's help) will be demonstrating scything. The rules of the association are available on line at <http://www.bodgers.org.uk> and were discussed at length. The APTGW provides insurance for members demonstrating at shows etc. There were no paid staff so overheads were kept low. There were three honorary officers – chair, treasurer and secretary.

Ian spoke on The Basket Makers Association, quite similar to the bodgers organisation in many ways though it does sponsor awards for training.

County based Master Thatcher Associations exist – based in counties, perhaps 40% of Master Thatchers are members. There is a national council of master thatchers but it fell apart due to lack of

structure, poor management resource and decision making, all issues to be avoided. A similar fate befell the first attempt to form a national coppice association and a second attempt is now being made. Two blacksmiths associations are in existence, but like the thatchers do largely represent commercial members.

Mike reported on his involvement in the Devon Rural Skills Trust. The Trust has the aim of keeping skills going and keeping standards up by a system of accreditation. Simon said that the potential scythe association was different in that a tool was to be promoted, rather than a profession.

A round table poll revealed a consensus for forming an association but with provisos and concerns which were further discussed prior to taking a vote.

Some concerns were expressed that an association might not be necessary given that individuals were already doing most of the things that need to be done. However Simon stated that there were things he would like to see happening which were not at the moment and having an association would really help as a way of communicating with larger organisations (eg local councils, national organisations) with credibility. Other things such as a website, forum, a project to collect and publish history and knowledge were also thought to be things an association could do which are not yet happening effectively.

Ian contributed a potential mission statement - **The proposed association exists to promote the knowledge, study, teaching and use of the scythe and allied skills in agriculture, small holding, conservation, landscape maintenance or as a leisure activity.**

## (2) Dangers and Misgivings

Proviso and concerns were expressed.

Mark – it needs to be set up correctly and it would be worse to do it wrong than not doing it at all

Ian – it needs to identify people to run it.

Steve – there is a need to understand what it will add that isn't already being done. Simon replied that there are things that aren't being done. For example publicising urban lawn mowing, a survey of local authorities. There needs to be a forum for working with others to achieve these things.

Simon – concerns over future manufacturers and supplies which could cease, (Mark/Simon – potential to look for UK manufacture of scythes).

A flip chart discussion was used to try to identify potential activities for the association that would be useful and address the dangers and concerns. After much discussion a consensus was reached on some use-activities (stuff we do) for an association -

- Promote training for skills

- Promote the scythe with general public (including via a website)

- Promote the scythe to national organisations and local government

- Enable communications between mowers and landowners

- Promote the knowledge & study of history and future potential

- Maintain standards of manufacture & supply of scythes and related equipment

There was a discussion on membership and subscriptions. What would members get? Do we need members? A comparison was made with the APTGW, whose members include about 20 professionals but 600 aspiring to a dream. John said that with a low membership subscription people will be more likely to join as scything is an aspiration, and-feel as though they are supporting an environmental cause. The income will provide for the minimum initial costs, such as a web site and administration costs.

### **(3) – Assuming we decide to go ahead, what form will the association take?**

The exact name of the proposed organisation turned out to be surprising contentious. Eventually several acceptable nominations were whittled down to the

**Scythe association UK**

and

**The Scythe Association  
(of Britain & Ireland)**

A vote was taken and the winner was **The Scythe Association (of Britain & Ireland)**.

The meeting then turned to some further subjects for discussion:

**Subscriptions.** Do we need it and what for? Promotion requires funding as does research, there will be overheads and running costs. Yes we need them, but the size is to be determined. A bank account will have to be set up.

**Paid or voluntary officers** The association will need at least a treasurer and secretary, a webmaster and of course a chairman. No position can be paid until there is some income, so officers will have to start as voluntary, but some payment of expenses will be needed and it is possible that payment might be agreed as an honorarium at a general meeting.

**Time available** A potential problem might be finding people to fulfil the roles, especially dealing with subscriptions which would be a lot of work. Simon proposes that the association starts with free membership for a year to keep down the overheads of getting the association going. Gemma added that membership should fall due at the same time each year and that those joining in between will be offered free membership for the remainder of the year.

To get the website off the ground donations can be made from the initial membership.

At this point several actions were discussed and taken.

**Action** – John Letts to ask his contact to find out how the website could be setup and what it would cost. (Websubgroup – Steve, John, Chris, Mark, Richard, Gemma, Derek)

**Action** – websubgroup to decide upon domain name.

**Action** - AGM or Scythers Winter Gathering to be held in January. Aim is to hold a conference to promote scythes and its uses in the off-season. John, Simon, Gemma, Richard to organise.

**Action** – Potential activity in 2012 to coincide with the Olympics. Simon to investigate.

**Action** – MA to add prototype aims to a standard set of association rules and circulate.

**Action** – Everyone to forward content for the Website and ideas for structure to the Webgroup (example – Simon to forward digital history information such as articles and photos).

**Summary of (3) the form the association will take** – The Association-lite will run for the first year with no formal officers and membership will be invited with free subscription. During the year

the website will be set up, rules of the association drafted, the meeting for January 2012 organised and progress reviewed before launching the formal association in 2012 with subscriptions.

Steve pointed out that the blogsite he has set up is to encourage a community or group approach – <http://scytherspace.wordpress.com> .

#### **(4) Relationship with the scythe shop.**

SF raised the potential for conflict of interest between his commercial interests (<http://www.thescytheshop.co.uk>) and the new association and felt that this might prevent him from serving as an officer of the association.

Figures for interest – SF – UK sells around 700 scythes per year whereas 16000 quality scythes are sold in Austria per year. The potential for scythe sales in the UK should be clear – but how to address the market and what is the market in the UK? Paul Kingsnorth is trialling a subsidiary outlet in Cumbria for the north of Britain, and there is potential for similar opportunities elsewhere (eg London area) with the formation of a co-operative.

Many customers elect to receive regular updates from SF (mostly by email), and there are about 700 names on the list. The next instalment will be in the form of a newsletter, and contributions to this are invited, including images.

#### **(5) Actions and roles confirmed**

Having discussed the potential name, the concerns and how the association might be started up, it was proposed that The Scythe Association (of Britain & Ireland) should now be formed. This was confirmed by a unanimous vote.

John volunteered to act as proto-treasurer and holder of the donations tin.

#### **(6) Any Other Business**

John described the potential for a PhD at Oxford University on the mechanics of scythe operation. The meeting adjourned at 18:05 for further discussions at a local hostelry.

## **Meeting reconvened at 10:30 Sunday morning with follow-up discussions**

### **Web domains**

**Action** – Derek to reserve and set up other Scythe Association accounts are taken up eg, twitter, gmail etc and Gemma will set up facebook for the Scythe Association.

### **Web site structure**

There was general discussion of what form the web-site should take. Should it be concise or massively expansive? The front pages should be relatively concise and allow visitors to find what they need within a few clicks, particularly to join. Will the site include a history section? General consensus is yes and this will be a growing and important part of the website. Richard demonstrated the Emorsgate website, with its 'Content Management System'.

Proposed list of tabs for the website

- Who we Are
- Events
- Equipment
- Training
- History
- Membership/Join
- Contacts or forum
- Contact us

The issue of how to run an initial contact us form is complex particularly if the membership database requirements are taken into account. We should try to find out what is simple to achieve whilst we try to define exactly what we will need to do.

**Action** – Derek to investigate web contact form which fills in a google docs spreadsheet. Categories to include are region.

**Action** – Derek to start investigating forums (free ones).

**Action** – Simon to include in his next mailout the formation of the SABI and they will receive an invitation to join (free membership in the current/first year).

### **Training**

A list of trainers/teachers will be compiled. The association will put the list on the web-site but does not approve the list. The list will indicate whether teachers are members of the association or not and whether they have taken the teachers course. Should include information on what level and subjects of teaching offered. Include dates and courses.

### **Ireland**

Details of events in Ireland will be included. Contact will be made (SF) with a contact in Ireland who was unable to attend the meeting.

**Date of next meeting** - Evening of Friday 10<sup>th</sup> June (on the site of the West Country Scythe Festival)

**Date of next AGM** – Third Saturday in January 2012 (potentially also the Winter Gathering)

Other dates: John Letts will be holding his Lammas celebration on the 3<sup>rd</sup> weekend of July.