



The Society of Light and Lighting

Presidential Address, 2009

'Back to the Future'

Stephen Lisk MSL

Past Presidents, Members, Ladies and Gentlemen

It's a huge honour for me to serve the Society of Light and Lighting as President in this, our centenary year.

Tonight, our Society has a story to tell. It is the story of a century of invention and innovation, of the history of our profession, of challenge, and of people, the people that have shaped our Society so profoundly.

In 1909, Leon Gaster first proposed the formation of the Illuminating Engineering Society, and a century later, we meet here in the Great Hall of the Royal Society of Arts, the historic setting of the first formal meeting of the Society.

By 1909, the RSA had long recognised the role illumination was to play in people's lives. Over one hundred papers had already been read here, dealing with various lighting methods, from the candle to the glow lamp. They had given prizes for the invention of miner's lamps, lighthouse apparatus, and supported practical developments in lighting. Lighting research and technology was already a part of the DNA of what was to become the Illuminating Engineering Society.

The inaugural meeting of the Society took place on the 18th of November 1909, with the Chair being taken by Sylvanus P Thomson. Gaster was appointed as Honorary Secretary with John S Dow as his assistant. Gaster had envisioned a Society based on informality and free speech, a Society that embraced innovation, a Society that was passionate about new ways of thinking.

I'd like to believe 100 years later those values still hold true.

Turning the page to 2009 then; as with all significant milestones, celebrating our centenary gives us a chance to reflect on who we are, what we stand for, our purpose, and whether as a Society, we are achieving the goals we have set ourselves.

Before we ask whether we are fulfilling the hopes and dreams of the Society's founders, let us look a little closer to home.

Two years ago, the Society set out a five-year strategic plan, focusing on four key areas, distilled into the four M's - Membership, Management, Money and Marketing.

Membership:

Our membership has remained largely static in recent years. Some people will tell you that this is a great result given the status of membership trends of other professional organisations, especially given the current economic climate. But is it good enough? If we're honest with ourselves, we know it isn't. Could we do more? Almost certainly.

Membership of any professional organisation means different things to different people, but at the core it's the same: in our case, a passion for lighting. For some it is about professional recognition as an expert in the field of lighting; for others it's about education and learning. For me, it is about participation and contribution

As a Society, we have to communicate the value of membership to those who remain sceptical. Over the last year, I have taken the opportunity to canvas the opinion of people in our industry, both members and non members, about their perception of our Society. We're highly respected. We are seen as leaders in providing technical guidance, a knowledge bank. But we're also perceived as being a bit stuffy, an exclusive club. We know that we're much more than that – borne out by the diversity of people in the audience tonight - but it's a message we are not communicating.

I'd like you for a moment to imagine our existing membership becoming one big PR team, conveying information in new ways and relaying the great benefits there are in being a member of the Society of Light & Lighting.

Tonight, I want to ask you this: Is being a part of a Society that publishes the Code for Lighting, the internationally respected Lighting Research and Technology Journal, hosts Masterclasses throughout the UK and Ireland, Young Lighter of the Year, Ready Steady Light, technical

presentations at regional meetings and is underpinned by the CIBSE, the largest Institution committed to engineering a sustainable built environment, is that worth 30p a day – less than the price of a cup of coffee or a newspaper?

If in the past you have thought, “Why should I become a member of the SLL?”, then maybe it’s time to ask yourself a better question – perhaps it’s now time to ask yourself, “What am I missing out on by not being a member?”

If membership is the fuel that drives our Society, then management is its engine.

Management:

Our strategic plan sets out key objectives, one of which is “the need to deliver excellence to our stakeholders by establishing effective operational mechanisms within SLL’s HQ and through the volunteer network”

The key word here is effective. The Society’s management structure is formed of our Executive, Council and Committees, coordinated through our Secretariat. The operational work of the Society, whether it is the publishing of lighting guides, the work of our membership, or communication committees, relies upon the commitment from volunteers, who, in the current climate are being asked to do more, with less time. It is the economics of applying scarce resources to boundless ambition.

Marketing:

Marketing is the ‘shop window’ to the Society. Our ‘customers’ will want to access information in a variety of different ways, via the web, on a handheld device, or for some, on paper. They may choose to be reminded of an event via text message, view a webcast or contribute to a blog on a lighting related issue. Some might want to actually get together and meet up in person!

Our brand is strongly identified with technical competency, the publishing of codes and the dissemination of technical information, but that is not the full story and how we communicate this and ultimately our message, is the key.

We have a new committee to look at all areas of communication and marketing and we have made some real progress: Lighting Research & Technology is now available online, there are

regular email updates to members on events and publications and the Code for Lighting CD contains much more information than a written publication ever could. We're even on Facebook!

But we can do more. We are working with the CIBSE marketing team to formulate a dedicated marketing plan for the Society and we are looking to create a stand-alone SLL website to reinforce and strengthen our brand. We have work to do: communicating who we are and what we do will be a primary area of focus for the Society this year.

Inevitably, these three Ms: Membership, Management and Marketing all require a fourth input – money.

Money:

The financial position of the Society in terms of its transparency and accuracy has never been better and I'd like to thank Cliff Shoebridge, our Honorary Treasurer and the finance team at the CIBSE for their hard work in this important area.

Our accounting is now clear and straightforward to understand. We are working with CIBSE on a new financial plan for the Society; the historic subvention to be replaced by a grant that reflects the needs of our membership and the aspirations of our Society. The way we are financed is fundamental to the Society going forward, and I am committed to having the new funding arrangements in place by the start of 2010.

So, if the objectives of the Strategic Plan are on the right track, albeit with much still to do, then where do we sit with the aspirations of Gaster and co?

The Society of Light and Lighting is the largest professional lighting body in the United Kingdom that represents the interests of those involved in the art, science and engineering of light and lighting.

I am proud that our Society plays a leading role within the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers, and I see it as a huge strength. Lighting, without question, is a fundamental building services discipline, but it is also an independent profession in its own right, a fact that Leon Gaster foresaw. I quote:

“Expert illumination engineers will have a professional existence, and will, although be few in number, be able to claim the distinction that name implies”

One hundred years later, although the language maybe different, that is the recognition we now give the 'Professional Lighting Designer'. And just as 100 years ago, lighting embraced a multi disciplinary approach, with inventors, gas engineers, street lighting engineers, and so on, today we must do the same. Lighting designers, architects, interior designers, electrical engineers and local authorities all have a valuable role to play.

Our Society remains committed to its objective of developing appropriate partnerships, both professional and trade. The prospect of forming a Lighting Council to embrace all parties is something that has been long talked of, and has my full support. Indeed Mike Simpson has pledged to see in its inception during his CIBSE Presidential year. The benefit to the Society of having a lighter as President of CIBSE during our centenary year is huge and I look forward to working with Mike in the coming months.

There are of course broader challenges we face: the economy, climate change and rapidly evolving technology among them.

The Economy:

We face a time of economic uncertainty, the like of which few would have predicted. However, I'd like to read you a quotation:

"No chancellor of the exchequer in modern times, has ever had to raise so much money for the necessities of the country"

You would be forgiven for thinking that quote was from Alistair Darling, but it was in fact from David Lloyd George in his People's Budget of 1909. The Illuminating Engineering Society had its own economic storm to weather.

The Society of Light and Lighting is not immune to the current economic downturn and the challenges it brings. We must do all we can to support our members in this time of financial uncertainty.

Climate change:

The fact that our climate is changing is no longer up for debate and is one of the greatest challenges facing the world today.

Building services now encompasses the disciplines of architecture, engineering, lighting design, daylight design and façade engineering joining together to create well designed sustainable environments.

Over the last 100 years lighting has transformed people's lives, in a way few, thought imaginable.

A century later we must again imagine new ways to light our homes, our schools, offices, and streets, with new ways of thinking, being as important as the embracing of new technologies.

Technology:

I'd like to read you another quotation from Leon Gaster; in February of 1909, Gaster delivered the first of his Cantor Lectures here at the Royal Society of Arts on "Modern Methods of Artificial Illumination". He described:

*"One conceivable method of lighting that many of you will consider fanciful,
but seems to me to possess great scientific possibilities"*

He was, of course, speaking of fluorescence.

A century ago, the Illuminating Engineering Society was highlighting the benefits of integrating daylight into buildings, of light and health and the role good lighting could play in keeping men and women safe from harm in the workplace.

The pace of change in lighting is rapid and few can predict where we will be one year from now, let alone in ten. The Society of Light and Lighting has, and will continue to be, a key player in this important area.

In our Centenary year, we have an historic moment of opportunity – but we need to act.

Our first action has been to introduce a Centenary incentive for new members who join the Society at our events this year; not only will we waive the joining fee, we will further subsidise the 2009 subscription to take it to just £66. Now, if we can't demonstrate enough value in a year to entice those members to renew at the full rate, then we haven't done our job properly.

We are also committed to achieving “100 new members in our 100th year”. Let me be clear: not just 100 new members but a net gain of 100; by this time next year I want our membership to read at least 2,100!

We have a lot to do to write the next chapter in our Society's history: the future of our Society, of our profession, and of our planet.

One final thought: if Gaster, Thompson, Dow and others are looking down upon us tonight, I hope that they see that the commitment, dedication and aspirations they held one hundred years ago continue to live on in our Society, the Society of Light and Lighting.

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