

RSCDS South Wales Branch

BRANCH SECRETARY'S REPORT 2024

Fellow Branch Members and Fellow Dancers, this has been a busy year for your Branch Committee, involving a number of potentially far-reaching changes. The main impetus for the changes came from a concern (shared by the Scottish Country Dance community across much of the world) that our dancing population is ageing, and that in many places numbers of dancers are dwindling. So publicity and recruitment have been key issues for the committee this year. How to attract new dancers and promote SCD in the wider community has been the focus of many hours of discussion and – more significantly – has provided a springboard for action.

Our current membership stands at forty-one annual members, four life members and two secondary members, which is not dissimilar to last year's total, although the stable figures mask a small amount of movement out and in, mainly because a) previous members have stopped dancing and b) because we've managed to recruit some new members, either through movement into the area, or through newcomers to SCD joining us.

Again, like last year, we are pleased that the wish to attend Summer School was a trigger for joining. We were particularly delighted by the representation of the Branch at Summer School in the summer of 2023: we had a total of sixteen South Wales Branch members dancing at At Andrews, i.e. over a third of our total Branch membership. Many of them are returning this summer.

The Branch events which we've organised since my last annual report have been:

- **A “Dance through the RSCDS Decades” event in Swansea on 30 September 2023.** We followed the same programme as Branches and groups all over the world, all marking the event globally within a twenty-four-hour period. We were thrilled that our attendance was excellent, with dancers aged from eight to eighty!
- **A workshop of dances drawn from RSCDS Book 53, held in Swansea on 10 December 2023.** This generated considerable interest (about twenty attendees). The subsequent feedback has been very positive, with a number of requests for a repeat of a similar event in the future
- **A “Kilts & Posh Frocks” dance in Cardiff on 24 February 2024, and a parallel event in Whitland on 23 March 2024, with music by “Take Two” and John Browne respectively.** Both events were relatively well attended, and both were deemed a great success in terms of the levels of enjoyment by all present. They also generated considerable income for the Branch (£382.25).
- **Our Annual Ball in Penarth on 27 April 2024, with music by Nicol McLaren and the Glenraig Band.** Numbers were again disappointingly low, with – also déjà vu – an agonising sense of apprehension in the weeks approaching the event about attendance figures and the magnitude of the probable loss, followed by a flurry of ticket sales in the last week. This late rally left us with a loss of only £147.20. More importantly, the atmosphere was convivial and the music uplifting; everyone seemed to enjoy themselves.

As most of you know, in January 2024 the Committee sadly reached the decision that the annual Festival was no longer viable (dwindling numbers of attendees and supporting groups, reduction to an afternoon event only, which in the event of wet weather was held in a venue without any possibility of reaching a wider public). So, we thanked George Meikle for playing for us so loyally over the many years and announced that the Festival in 2023 had been the

last. However, in order to try to publicise Scottish Country Dancing and hopefully recruit new dancers, we have now decided instead to organise an annual Celebration of Dancing in the open air at the end of September in the form of ceilidh dancing and a family picnic. This year it will be held at the end of September at Oystermouth Castle in Mumbles, with a wet-weather venue just next door.

We have also decided that we will not run an Annual Ball any longer. Instead, building on the success of the Kilts & Posh Frocks dances, we envisage a range of other types of events. Ideas floated so far have been an Autumn Dance, a Spring Dance, and a revival in some form of the Walk-Through Dances for more experienced dancers. On this last thought, we are also planning to run a range of workshops (e.g. more complex dances; dances from the new RSCDS book in years when there is one; Drewry dances; Goldring dances, etc.) We welcome suggestions from members, as well as offers to head up an event. Do **you** fancy setting up a workshop?

All this brings me neatly to a repetition of the fact that we are in the midst of a period of considerable change. As indicated, this change has to be understood in the context of altered habits resulting from the experience of Covid and the lockdown; an ageing population; the need to increase numbers and attract younger dancers; and also a desire to be more inclusive in all sorts of ways. Committee members have listened to feedback from members and have invested time and effort in strategic planning. Among the changes or proposed changes have been an attempt to make the committee more accessible (e.g. minutes of committee meetings being sent out to all members; active participation in planning and running events from the wider membership, not just committee members).

We are trying to be inclusive in other ways too, often linking in with Wellbeing initiatives. We have tried to reach out to the community, with a number of taster sessions, ceilidh dances and beginners' classes being run by committee members and others. Members have distributed information to hubs, libraries, GP practices, clinics etc. We have visited a local Beavers Group. The RSCDS central website link has led to a considerable number of enquiries this year, in some cases resulting in new recruits, several of whom have started to attend local classes - and have become hooked! Hopefully the next step will be that they will join the Branch.....

Another form of reaching out to the community has been a series of small-scale demonstrations in care homes. We have become much in demand, especially around St Andrews Night and Burns Night, when we usually have to turn people down! Although hardly a rich seam for recruitment, the huge social and emotional benefits of those occasions have sometimes felt quite overwhelming. And now and again staff members do express an interest in joining classes. Much of this activity takes place under the auspices of local groups and informal demonstration teams, not bearing the banner of RSCDS as such. But perhaps that makes the point that we are trying to work together in a mutually supportive way, with the Branch as an enabling resource.

One of the major changes has been the setting up of a new Branch website, with the aim of improving accessibility. This new website has not yet been launched, but with the very generous help of a fellow-dancer from another Branch who is also a website expert we have been able to get a fresh website in place. This is currently being made available to committee members for review, and we hope it will also be able to be checked out by members and be up and running over the course of the summer, ready for a fresh programme of events from the autumn.

However, in our excitement at this new development we should not forget our debt of gratitude to Fran Smith, who over many years has maintained our existing website, and has worked hard to encourage us all to make good use of it. Fran has decided not to take on the new

website. However, she is committed to continuing to run the Branch Shop website in its usual form. Thank you, Fran, for all your work and perseverance.

This brings me to some other thank yous – to those who for a range of different reasons will be leaving the committee. Christine Davies, Jean Elliott and Sue Faragher Downes have all indicated their wish to stand down. We would like to thank them all for their commitment and hard work, and to hope that they will continue to support the Branch in a variety of ways. Jean and Sue have already assured us of this. Christine is planning to leave South Wales in order to be nearer her family in South-East England. We wish her well with her move and we hope that our dancing paths will still cross.

As always, we are grateful to our President, Ron Hewinson, and our Vice-President, Alex Gray, for their continuing support. Ron is unfailing in sending greetings to us to mark significant events such as the Ball and the AGM, and he still avidly receives all our news when we send communications and when we visit him. Thank you, Ron for all your years of service to the Branch. With his great breadth of experience Alex too is a huge help to us in offering a wider perspective, as well as supporting the promotion of SCD via his very generous funding raised from the sale of his and James's books and CDs. With the aid of Zoom he attends committee meetings whenever he can. Thank you, Alex, for your continuing magnanimous support.

And I would also like to express my appreciation of how quickly the two new office bearers have got their heads around the complexities of running a Branch and have put their own stamp on our ways of doing things. Thank you, Heather as Chair, and Jane as Treasurer. It has been a pleasure to work with you. I have now come to the end of my term of office as Branch Secretary. I am delighted to say that we have found a willing (?) volunteer to take over the role. If she is elected, and if I were to be elected as an ordinary committee member, I have agreed to stay on the committee in the role of her mentor as she takes on what we hope will be a slimmed-down version of the job of Secretary. It is envisaged that various functions will either be farmed out to others or re-cast in a different, less onerous, form (e.g. a website calendar and blogs rather than a Newsletter).

To every Branch member, please consider standing for the committee and doing your bit to help keep the Branch alive.

Above all, thank you to you all as South Wales Branch members for your on-going support over this year. For the future – more Happy Dancing, everyone!

Alison Jackson

Honorary Secretary, 11 June 2024