

**RAISING THE WIND***by Paddie Drake*

“Paddie, we’ve been offered a Gainsborough!” The voice on my telephone in July 1991 was that of our Curator, not an unusual occurrence, given the closeness of the relationship between Friends and staff, but the statement was electrifying, as I could well remember the previous Appeal, in 1982 - but that was before I was on the Council, let alone Chairman.

This picture was of the greatest importance to Ipswich, as it was the only known painting by Gainsborough of the town, where he had lived and worked for around nine years in the mid-18th century. It depicts Holywells Park and its succession of ponds leading like a staircase down to the river. Not only is the scene still recognisable today and a beautiful landscape of the artist’s early period, it is also a unique portrayal of local industrial archaeology. The ponds, believed originally to have been fishponds for a monastery (hence ‘holy wells’), had been developed by Thomas Cobbold, just a few years before Gainsborough painted them, for supplying water to his new brewery, on the banks of the river below; the cut to lead the water from the lowest pond to the brewery can still be seen.

The question I found I was being asked, when my mind cleared, was not whether the Friends would help, but whether we would run the Appeal, a quite different scenario from 1982, when the Friends had given their name to an Appeal which had effectively been run by the Borough. This was a tall order and looked taller still when I heard the asking price of £375,000. Since I became Chairman two years before, we had been working to build the credibility of the Friends as a knowledgeable, supportive and constructive force in the local museum arena. To refuse this request would undo all that work in an instant.

An immediate plan of action was swiftly made. First, a visit to Agnew’s, handling the sale on behalf of an anonymous client; we needed to establish the time-scale within which the cash had to be raised, whether the price was negotiable, whether the painting could be brought to Ipswich as the centrepiece of the Appeal and finally, whether we would be permitted to have prints made as

part of the fundraising process. Second, a discussion with Lord Tollemache, our President and a sterling supporter in 1982. Third, a meeting with the Chairman of the responsible borough committee and the officers; and fourth, an emergency meeting of the Friends’ Council. We completed this schedule within thirteen days of the first telephone call and on 19th July I told the Curator that we were committed, although we all knew that raising the full sum was way beyond the capacity of the Friends and would depend on the support of the major national grant-giving bodies. They in their turn, would only provide funds if a substantial sum could be raised locally.

Our main problem was timing - we were running into August. The Curator immediately sent applications for funding to the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the National Art Collections Fund (NACF) and the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF). The V&A told us before the end of July that they would provide £55,000, but there would be no news from NACF until late August and the NHMF would not meet until 27th September. By this time we knew from Agnew’s that we had until the end of the year, with an indication that, if we were well on the way to our total by that date, we could probably bank on a further month. Take out the Christmas holiday and we were looking at less than two and a half months in which to break the back of the Appeal; a tall order indeed.

The full Council was clearly too large to be an effective driving force and I set up an executive committee with three Council members, Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Treasurer, a secretary who would also represent the younger element, and two Appeal Officers co-opted from the membership. These last were two young people who had retired early, with energy, ability and time and they carried the main day-to-day burden. The virtual full-time commitment of those two made it possible to keep on top of the wok and left me free to keep the momentum flowing.

Where did all the money come from? At the second meeting of the Appeal Committee we all wrote down how much we thought we could raise. Two read £50,000 and the other five £75,000. With a deep breath we went for the higher figure. This meant that the NACF and

NHMF between them had to come up with offers of at least £245,000 - and I doubt if any one of us really thought we could meet our target, given the advancing recession. By the end of August we had heard from NACF - '£40,000. with a bit more if you're short'. That meant we needed £205,000 from the NHMF on its own and depression set in, with a further month to wait for their decision and a lot of work to be done in the meantime. Then on 27th September came the news that NHMF had come up trumps - 'up to £260,000'. From that moment none of us doubted that we would make it.

Holywells Park lies between the docks and the town's Gainsborough council estate. For this reason we decided to spread the Appeal widely and to involve as broad a cross-section of the people of the town as possible. One of these ideas, a rock concert, led us into our one failure; ticket sales were so poor that we were forced to cut our losses and cancel. The young people who worked so hard to put the concert on were beaten by competition from Lenny Henry, but fortunately raised enough by other means to cover cancellation charges. Ipswich Town Football Club gave an autographed football, which we raffled in the town centre on the Saturday before Christmas, and a number of pubs, working men's clubs and firms' sports and social clubs raffled framed prints of the picture. Prints and art-cards were also sold in considerable numbers through the museum, as were the 3,000 copies of the greetings card printed in time for Christmas.

Considerable help came from canvassing other bodies. I spoke at all the Rotary Club' luncheons in the town and Appeal Committee members attended a Chamber of Commerce luncheon with good effect. Local groups of the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies circulated copies of our Appeal letter to all their members, backed by letters of recommendation from their chairman. This was highly productive.

Our most successful event was the Supper Concert held in Christchurch Mansion, the Elizabethan house which forms our museum for fine and applied arts. The music was organised by two Friends, who compiled a programme of music by contemporaries and friends of Thomas Gainsborough, himself no mean musician. Our Secretary headed a group of other Friends and supporters to serve a splendid cold supper after the concert. Although the gallery could only seat just over 100, offering supper allowed us to charge premium prices and, with most of the puddings and the wine donated, we cleared nearly £1,000 on the evening, after all expenses. It was also highly successful as entertainment and in public relations value for the Friends, as all who came

thoroughly enjoyed themselves, were impressed by the organisation and felt they had received good value for money, as well as supporting a good cause.

The most productive single venture was the 'Gift for Gainsborough' exhibition and sale. Richard Woollett wrote to 200 local artists and invited them to submit works to be displayed for ten days and then auctioned. Their gift would be either the whole sum raised in the sale, or a minimum of half the proceeds. Almost 100 artists backed the cause and around half of them donated the proceeds in full. This event was run for us by the local office of Phillips, as sponsorship in kind; well over half the exhibits were sold, and the contribution to the Appeal, after all expenses, was almost £3,500.

Like most municipal museums, ours are heavily used by the Local Education Authority. We therefore wrote to head teachers inviting them to encourage their pupils to put something back by raising money for the Appeal. The response was generally very disappointing, with only three of the schools addressed doing anything for us - and none of the others even answered, a sad reflection of the value placed on the museums which play host to school parties on almost every day of each term in the year. A junior form in the Girls' High School raised over £700 through a sponsored 'spell-in', but the most exciting project of the whole Appeal was held in Holywells High School, located in one of the least affluent parts of Ipswich.

Holywells's Headmaster was immediately enthusiastic and intrigued by the idea, proposed by our Treasurer's wife, of some form of sponsored painting marathon; a week later the idea had been transformed by the Head of the Art Department. He produced a line drawing of Gainsborough's picture, within which there were one hundred numbered spaces, just like a page in a painting-by-numbers book, except that his picture was about twice the size of the original. The Chairman of Governors runs a printing firm and he donated copies for every class in the school. The children were then challenged to raise one pound for every space in the picture, and, as each pound came in, so that class was allowed to colour a space.

Three of us went to the launch and explained what the painting meant to the town and how much we needed their help. We then left them to it. Three weeks later I was invited to receive a cheque for £2,000, a magnificent effort, especially when it is remembered that many of the families on the estates from which the pupils came were suffering the effects of the recession in short-time working and redundancy. The Friends were so thrilled

by their efforts that they donated a framed copy of the print, inscribed in recognition of what the School had done; that picture is now known in the school as 'The Gainsborough Award' and is presented at the end of each term to the class which is adjudged to have done most for the community.

On 17th December we held our final event - a lecture by Sir John Hayes, Director of the National Portrait Gallery and leading Gainsborough expert. We were now on target; although the full amount required had not yet been raised, a sum had been earmarked from Friends' funds to make up any shortfall and we were already well within it. On 27th December I telephoned Agnew's with the news. One week later we handed over to the Mayor of Ipswich the Friends' cheque and the painting belonged to the town. The excitement over, there were still loose ends to be tied up, with bills to be settled, money still coming in and tax on covenants to be reclaimed.

It had not all been plain sailing; our Public Relations Officer was not available for much of the time and it became clear that publicity needs constant monitoring and regular contact with the media. At the mid-point the local paper had published an account which suggested that the local target had been reached and a number of potential donors had to be convinced that their money was still needed; getting a correction published was difficult for the layman. With hindsight we would have benefited from someone looking after the events, as generator of ideas, co-ordinator and promoter. We coped without, but there were strains, especially because we needed to enlist people from outside the Committee to run most events for us.

Early in the planning stage we accepted an oral statement that the full costs of the art-printing would be met as sponsorship in kind, to find later that only about 50% was covered. The sum involved turned out not to be crucial, but it is clear that we should have asked for confirmation of what was offered. Finally, it needs to be recognised that an Appeal of this nature needs people of drive and high commitment, if it is to succeed. When a committee of such people work under pressure, there will be friction and it is essential to have a safety-valve; we repaired each week after our committee meetings to The Woolpack, a source of good ale adjacent to the museum where we met. There tensions were released, team-building progressed and we learned a lot about each other.