

MINUTES OF MEMBERS' MEETING HELD AT WESLEY'S CHAPEL CITY ROAD.
ON SATURDAY 12TH JANUARY. 2008.

Chairman: Dr Ilse Vickers.

Speaker: Dr David Allan.

Apologies for absence were received from Mr Brian Rees, Mr Michael Bundock and Ms Kate Chisholm.

Notices:

1. The speaker in February will be Dr Jane Steen on:
"JOHNSON AND ANGLICANISM."
2. Committee Members are reminded that the next Committee meeting will be on February 9th at 12.30pm, before the usual meetings. Refreshments will be provided, as usual. Nominations for the Committee should be sent to the Hon. Secretary by this date.
3. Mrs Odile Thrale has contacted Mrs O'Donnell to thank the Society for the flowers we sent her during the Christmas period.
4. Information leaflets of interest to Members are displayed on the side as usual.
4. Tea and biscuits are available after the meeting at the modest price of 50 p a cup.
5. Minutes of the meeting held on Saturday, December 8th 2007 were read and signed by the Chairman, after approval.
6. **Introduction of the speaker:** Dr Allan is the Honorary Historical Adviser of the RSA and author of, *"The Houses of the Royal Society of Arts: A History and a Guide (1974); "William Shipley, Founder of the Royal Society of Arts (1979); "Stephen Hales: Scientist and Philanthropist,"* with co-author R.E. Schofield, (1980); *"The Virtuoso Tribe of Arts and Sciences: Studies in the Eighteenth Century work and Membership of the London Society of Arts,"* with co-author J.K. Abbott (1993); *"The RSA: A chronological History of the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce,* (1999), and, *"The Adelphi Past and Present: a History and a Guide (2001).*
Dr Allan said that Johnson's life was in many ways co-terminus with the "rise and progress" of the Society of Arts, founded by William Shipley, which survives to this day as the RSA. By the time Johnson joined it in December 1756, it was well established, having started

with eleven members in a Covent Garden Coffee House, it now met in Craig's Court, Whitehall and had a membership of 213. An announcement in *"The Gentleman's Magazine"* of that year described the premiums of the Society as having already produced "*great advantages to the Nation.*" The membership grew to over 2000, including prominent statesmen, noblemen, clergymen, merchants, artists and skilled tradesmen. It moved to Fielding's house on the Strand, then to Denmark Street, where Johnson said that his "*flowers of oratory would forsake him,*" and where he sponsored the artists' exhibitions in the early 1760's.

The Adams brothers completed their redevelopment of the Durham House estate, which they called the Adelphi. Johnson witnessed, from Garrick's new house on the terrace, the Society's move to its "*temple of the Arts and Sciences*" in John Street.

Johnson's association with the Society was immortalised by James Barry's paintings 1778-83. In the twentieth century illuminating evidence regarding his membership of the Society began to be published, which has added to our knowledge of his life. An article, "*Dr Johnson and his friends at the Society of Arts,*" undoubtedly written by H.B. Wheatley appeared in the Society's *Journal* for October 1900.

In an issue of the *Journal* for October 1888 H.B. Wheatley noted that Johnson's house in Gough Square had one of the memorial tablets with which the Society commemorated great historical personages. Wheatley had also made a careful study of the Society's subscription books and membership lists.

John Lawrence Abbott, in his paper, *"Dr Johnson and the Society"* clarified Johnson's early and middle years in defining Hawkesworth's life, finding twenty-five references to Samuel Johnson, more if a Mr Johnson, referred to, is the same man. Johnson sat on five Society committees, and possibly another four. Abbott believes that Johnson voted for Robert Dossie not, as Boswell claims, to be a member of the Society, but to support him in a special secretarial election, which he lost.

John Sunderland, speaking on "*Samuel Johnson and History Painting,*" showed how Johnson helped to make the public aware of the Society's premiums for history painting by means of his writings.

Johnson's last subscription was for 1762, in 1764 he "declined" to pay, so resigning from the Society. Reynolds had formed a breakaway society in 1761, which Johnson supported.

There is no mention in the Thrale correspondence or the biographies of Johnson sitting for Barry's fifth picture of the Adelphi series, yet the figure in the painting points to work done from life. The National Portrait Gallery has a profile to the right of Johnson's head, which Barry sketched in and which was later painted out. Barry's proclaimed intention was to render homage to the great and good. He calls Johnson, "*that venerable sage,*" and "*this great master of morality.*" He specifically praises in his "*Account*" Johnson's qualities of character rather than his writings. Johnson's "*kindness to the Irish*" and respect for the Roman Catholic Church must have appealed to Barry, but Barry's politics could have been no recommendation to Johnson. We do not know if Johnson saw the Adelphi pictures when they first went on view, but he had read Barry's "*Account.*" According to Boswell, Johnson's verdict on the Adelphi paintings was, "*Whatever the hand may have done, the mind has done its part. There is a grasp of mind which you will find nowhere else.*"

James Harrison in the RSA's 1985 symposium told of Johnson's involvement in the use of Lewis Paul's cotton spinning machinery, and John Mallet rebuffed the tradition that "*the Grand Cham of Literature muddied his fingers with pot works.*" Bevis Hillier believes that he did experiment at the Chelsea factory.

Dr Adams concluded with a hitherto unpublished account of Madden sending Shipley a letter to forward to Johnson and expressed the hope than in the tercentenary year someone will find this letter.

After an animated discussion Dr Adams was warmly thanked by Mrs Rees for his informative and interesting "*flowers of oratory.*"