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Grave Concerns About the Future of the Society's Reference Library

After the last AGM closed one member asserted that no one had visited the Society's reference library in Nottingham for ten years. There was no time to challenge this incorrect statement in the few minutes remaining before the final lunch. The member asked that the Council appoint an independent person to advise on the Library's future: the Chairman said that Council would consider the matter.

Members should be aware that the value, merits and cost effectiveness of the BSS Library Collection were discussed in detail by an earlier Council as recently as March 2011.

The unanimous conclusion was that the Library is an important affordable asset fundamentally supported by the Objects of the Society. It advertises the Society and is available to the general public and therefore is a vital part of our Public Benefit provision required by the Charity Commission. It is one of only a few collections of general dialling material, books and ephemera publicly available for research in the UK, and it only costs less than 38p per member per annum (1% of a typical subscription). So it cannot possibly represent a significant drain on the Society's annual income and therefore the overall cost of the Library cannot be an issue.

We are concerned because the present Council is attempting to count the visitors to the Society's collection with the implication that this reflects the viability of the Library. It would be ludicrous to assess the worth of any Reference Library simply by its apparent usage because the number of visitors is quite irrelevant to the library's importance and research potential. Measuring visitor traffic demonstrates both an ignorance of the process of academic research and the very practical difficulty of discovering which specific books anybody actually refers to in any library. We can find no examples of academic reference libraries being measured for their importance and viability by simple measures of footfall.

The extraordinary assertion of 'no visitors' is quite untrue. Although there have been relatively few, there have been visitors to the BSS Collection in the last ten years. Indeed the Council itself (including the complaining member!) has until recently met at the library annually and on each occasion Trustees have referred to the collection.

Numerous BSS members, some from abroad, Bromley House members and the general public are known to have accessed the collection. The BSS Librarians are frequent visitors. The Bromley House Trustees appreciate the association with the BSS and have expressed it recently in a generous allocation of space in the prestigious Thoroton Room. They believe that Bromley House with its rare meridian line and scientific past is a very appropriate location for a Sundial Library which also complements their other collections.

Members are also reminded that at no cost the Society also maintains other Reference Collections namely the Mass Dial Archives at York University and the Fixed Dial Archives in Kent. Neither of these unique sets of national records has ever had any significant number of visitors. Are these Collections also candidates for disposal? Many of the important (and valuable) books in the BSS collection are there only due to the generosity of certain members who specifically wished to share their private collections with others. Therefore the BSS Collection cannot be dispersed without impediment. Many of these donors would wish to have their books returned rather than see them sold to add to the excess of uncommitted funds held by the Society.

There is no issue of cost, there is no issue of space, the Society is very far from bankrupt, its reserves rise even as membership decreases, the Library and Archives bring nothing but benefit, may we suggest that the Council should avoid this distraction and focus its energy and attention on more urgent projects which develop and reinforce our Society?

Nick Orders, Patrick Powers, Graham Aldred, Gerald Stancey, Nick Nicholls