

# THE ROYAL INSTITUTION 1799- ????

**We have recently become used to financial crises threatening the world as we know it being solved at the 11th hour (and usually at the 59th minute).**

**Against the backdrop of Greece and Cyprus, the travails of the Royal Institution may seem trivial.**

Ten (or so) years ago, the organisation was greatly loved, but perceived as being not quite ready for the 21st century.

An ambitious plan to improve the facilities (with help from the Heritage Lottery Fund) transformed the Grade 1 listed building. The Queen came to open it.

Unfortunately, the business plan failed to come to fruition, and a substantial overdraft had to be dealt with.

Since the freehold might be worth three times the debt, a solution was always likely to emerge, but questions of national heritage were bound to intrude.

A public outcry twenty or so years ago resulted in Down House being preserved both as a memorial to Darwin, and as a museum describing the significance for modern science and society of his work. Surely something would “turn up” as Wilkins Micawber might have said.

Our Treasurer, Lord Willis, wrote a piece for the Guardian earlier this year in which he suggested that although the Board had earned our thanks for their attempts, nonetheless “the game is up”.

He pointed out that in the time since Davy, Faraday and co had brought scientific



Photo: Tim Mitchell

enlightenment to the chattering classes of Georgian and Victorian London, many other bodies had now rushed into this area, and many were doing a superb job on tiny budgets. He felt (and many others have agreed) that the building is unnecessarily large for what many perceive to be the RI's core activities.

He finished by saying that if a sustainable funding model could be found, then he would “gladly retract my blunt assessment of the sad situation facing us”.

Many other articles with a variety of points of view followed.

The journal *Nature* pointed out that “people who wish to be informed about a topic no longer need to sit in an uncomfortable seat and listen to a lecture by an *eminence grise*.” It felt that the Science Museum might take it over as part of its outreach activities.

On the other hand, Mark Miodownik felt that merely sitting in the lecture theatre where Faraday had demonstrated gave “a tingle at the back of your neck”.

For Suzie Sheehy “presenting at the RI is considered an honour” for a practising scientist.

Michael Kenward optimistically pointed out that “the Wellcome Trust seems to be awash with money” and might therefore come to the rescue.

Haroon Rafique, who as a teenager was funded to visit from Rochdale, emphasised that “the point of this excursion was not to be taught. It was to be inspired”.

David Logan, an exhibitor there, remembers that “it was a humbling feeling to sit in the lecture theatre, listening to a Nobel Prize winner, while absorbing the atmosphere”.

Even more romantically, Andrea Sella felt that “the RI's brand is intimately tied with the location”, and likens the building to La Scala or La Fenice!

Alice Thomson, the descendant of both Braggs, remembers that “the RI was haunted by Nobel Prize winners”.

Realistically, Shane McCracken calculated the sum required was less than a single Titian for the National Gallery.

Sir Richard Sykes, currently Chair of the Trustees, chipped in with a sturdy rebuttal. He reminded us that the RI had been here before, and had survived. By 1803 it was already £3,000 (equivalent to tens of millions today) in debt. Once the story about the current problem had become public, he had been gratified to experience the level of public support. He is confident that the team (see below) now has an opportunity to create a national strategy for science communication.

Finally, the denouement (we all hope) came at an EGM of the RI on 19th March

It was revealed that an anonymous benefaction had been secured which would alleviate the present squeeze.

A future plan does still need to be mapped out, and several eminent (and busy) scientists have lent their name to this exercise – Brian Cox, Robert Winston, Harry Kroto and Paul Nurse – to name but a few.

Watch this space.

**Alan Malcolm**