

BOS past present future

by David Brill

Origami has been known in Europe for a long time, although not until the twentieth century by its Japanese name. Every schoolchild knows how to fold a simple paper plane, or a traditional boat that floats. The traditional pajarita and the salt-cellar are well known. Folding traditions are well established: for example elaborate folded napkin table decorations of unbelievable complexity were made in the sixteenth century; twisting folded leather purses are still used, and cleverly collapsing baptismal certificates emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The influential pedagogue Friedrich Fröbel introduced simple paper folding exercises in German kindergartens in the nineteenth century.

In the early and mid twentieth century, instructions for simple folded models appeared in hobby and craft books. A few key English language books by authors such as Maying Soong, Murray and Rigney, and Houdini (the famous escapologist) all featured folding diagrams for simple designs, and all helped to sow the seeds of knowledge in parts of the world where origami was not an indigenous art form. I was introduced to paper folding through the pages of Rupert Annual, the beautifully illustrated children's story book by Alfred Bestall. To give the annual an added attraction in the post WW2 years, Bestall added a page of simple origami instructions in each annual, and with great delight, I folded the flapping bird from these pages when I was 5. So did many British children of my generation.

Quite a number of enthusiasts were similarly infected. Many in the UK were connected by the initiative of Iris Walker and Sidney French while Origami Center of America founder Lillian Oppenheimer assisted by providing addresses. A few links were made with Japan, for example with Akira Yoshizawa and Toshie Takahama. Even though Great Britain is relatively small, meetings were not always convenient and so communication was by a *portfolio* system: this was a strong box, posted between the group members who each added a new item of origami interest each time, and then posted the box to the next member having removed their previous contribution. This way, the portfolio was always full of new material when it arrived.

But a more formal organisation was needed. So 50 years ago on 28th October 1967, the British Origami Society was founded and eleven people met at the Russell Hotel London where responsibilities were allocated. They included Sidney French (Chairman), John Smith (Librarian), and Mick Guy (Secretary). One of the first priorities of the new society was to establish a library: there was very little origami material then, and much as today, the first members were ravenous for new information and models to fold. Diagrams were collected from many sources, including generous contacts in the USA. The formal constitution of the Society was written by David Lister, a practicing lawyer, and the logo was designed by Eric Kenneway, a formally trained artist. Robert Harbin, a professional stage magician, had become famous also for a long-running British TV origami programme, and he published several important origami books in the 50's and 60's which stoked the fire. He was elected the first BOS President, a non-executive role.

British Origami, the BOS magazine, had humble beginnings: it was simply typewritten without illustrations, then copied and stapled. But in the following years, it developed considerably, adding photos, diagrams, and many more features. It was the inspiration for the periodicals of several other European societies which formed in the following years. Eagerly awaited, it appears every two months and contains articles, diagrams, reviews, letters and comment which keep members up to date with origami trends and developments. There is a digital version available at a lower membership rate, designed for members in far-away countries in order to eliminate postage costs. *British Origami* is undoubtedly the most important benefit of BOS membership.

In spite of its title, the British Origami Society is truly international, with approximately half of its 600 members from abroad. Many of these come to our conventions every spring and autumn in different locations throughout the UK, to join local enthusiasts and share their origami experiences. Since I first joined the Society in 1974, conventions attendances have grown from about 40 delegates to well over 100 each time. The recent BOS 50th anniversary convention in Stratford upon Avon was attended by over 300 people. In any case there is a loyal core of members who attend wherever the meeting is held! Convention activities follow the format familiar

to JOAS members: folding, lectures... and fun. BOS conventions try to be spontaneous and we have resisted the practice of ticketing and enrolment for classes. We say: if you want to fold something, just join in! Even in Stratford, this informality worked. Smaller *mini-meetings* of local members are encouraged and supported financially, and there are at least ten regular local groups throughout the UK. Strong links have been forged with origami societies and groups throughout the world, and close attention is given to origami designers at home and abroad, to stimulate new ideas in others and to publicise the latest trends.

There is a strong sense of friendship within the British Origami Society family, which follows international origami traditions of openness and cooperation. Members become lifelong friends, despite sometimes widely different backgrounds. Founder member Eric Kenneway was a shy man, without close relatives. He studied Japanese because of his interest in origami and for his studies he won a prize to come to Japan, which he visited on two occasions. He clearly regarded the BOS as his true family, as on his death in 1987 we learned that he had chosen the BOS as the main beneficiary of his estate. Kenneway's bequest has ensured the financial stability of the Society, and since then substantial reserves have accumulated. With the addition of the royalties of Robert Harbin's origami books, also bequeathed to the BOS, the assets are used to subsidise the cost of conventions and its charitable activities. These finances are carefully controlled to ensure that the reserves will grow and continue to serve future generations.

Starting from the 1970s, a number of research texts, diagram collections and monographs of individual folder's work have been privately published by the BOS, because of the initial scarcity of available origami books. To begin with they were low budget, but BOS publications have evolved and continue to offer more specialised and advanced material. I believe the BOS was the first origami organisation to produce a convention book containing diagrams of the models taught at the convention: it's a highly popular publication. Before the internet shopping revolution, BOS supplies also sold a very wide range of commercial books and papers, many of them imported from Japan, but as many origami titles and paper are now easily obtainable, this activity has now been scaled back a little.

Over the years a huge quantity of origami books have been added to the Society library, which has acquired collections from members who have passed away, or lost interest. Many treasures were in the Ev Gloe and David Lister collections, including one particularly prized possession: an original edition of *Senbazuru Orikata*. We continue the lending library established by our founders, and a range of items is available for loan at conventions, although rare and precious things are carefully controlled.

The BOS became a registered UK charity in 1985 in recognition of its activities in the education of origami and its use in therapy. All BOS officials are voluntary, and the society continues to be run by committed enthusiasts who are not allowed to profit personally from society activities. The establishment of formal premises as the British Origami Centre was the dream of our first president Robert Harbin, but this is not considered necessary or practical at present. There is actually no formal office of the society and Council members work from home, although there are quarterly meetings of the Council to discuss plans and priorities and to allocate responsibilities for the future.

I am very honoured to have been elected BOS President for the next three years, 2018-2021. The British Origami Society has been a huge part of my life for more than 40 years, and although the role is honorary, I think I can contribute in some small ways. It is difficult to predict the future of origami in the light of the extraordinary advances and developments in origami during the last 50 years, but one thing is certain-the BOS will prosper thanks to the enthusiasm and commitment of its dedicated supporters, aided by their sense of fun, and bolstered by the firm framework established by our founders.

Happy Fiftieth Birthday, British Origami Society!