

RSA JOURNAL

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Meet VNCCII: the fictional superheroine fighting for our future communities - on Earth and beyond



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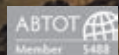
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CONTENTS

COURAGEOUS COMMUNITIES

- 5** **Comment**
- 6** **RSA NextGen**
- 9** **New Fellows**
- 10** **Cosmic communities**
Samantha Tauber, aka VNCCII, imagines looking to space will help build a better Earth
- 16** **People powered**
Lucy Crompton-Reid on the power of Wikimedia’s human-centred approach
- 20** **RSArchive**
From archives to vaults, Jerry Lockspeiser uncovers the RSA’s largely unknown wine legacy
- 22** **Lord John Bird in conversation**
Founder of *The Big Issue* John Bird talks poverty, politics and painting with Andy Haldane
- 28** **RSA 250th Gala**
RSA House turned 250 this year; a birthday party helped raise funds for the future of the Society
- 29** **Eyes wide open**
Photographs and reflections from a ‘new creative generation’ of students supported by the Ideas Foundation
- 34** **A novel approach**
Sophia Smith Galer dives deep into the world of BookTok, a community opening new doors for authors and bookworms alike
- 38** **Secret sauce**
Incoming Chair Loyd Grossman’s excitement at the RSA’s next chapter
- 42** **Shared interest**
Priyanka Sippy reports from the diverse (and moving-towards-digital) world of community banking in Africa
- 46** **Arts in the spotlight**
- 49** **Fellowship**
RSA Fellowship news and events
- 54** **Last word**
Vicki Thomas gives good ‘gift’



Courageous communities
Cover illustration by **Sophie Donaj**, aka SMID, an illustrator and designer based in Germany. Donaj’s cover imagines VNCCII, the alter ego of young Fellow Samantha Tauber, as an intergalactic space heroine. Donaj’s work is nostalgic, yet modern; clients include Netflix, Penguin and *Noema* magazine.



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Starting in 1783, the RSA published *Transactions of the Society*, which became *The Journal of the Society of Arts* in 1852 ('Royal' was added to the title in 1908). The publication assumed its current name, *RSA Journal*, in 1987.

Andy Haldane



The courage to change our minds

It is often said that the hardest thing in the world to change is our own minds.

Large parts of the Western world have been pursuing an economic and social agenda that has left their electorates, especially the poorer ones, disenfranchised and disconsolate. That is not just my verdict; it is has been the verdict of billions of people across the planet who have gone to the polls this year. The recent US election was merely the latest example.

Self-styled centrists and progressives have failed to speak to, or for, their core. That is a challenge to us, as RSA Fellows, as much as it is to politicians. Are we immersing ourselves in the warm bath of like-minded, perhaps even elitist, views rather than the cold shower of the lived experience of those furthest from power, learning and earning? And, if so, how do we reattach with those most marginalised in society?

Few demonstrate an approach to change rooted in their lived experience better than Lord John Bird, founder of *The Big Issue* (and much else), our feature interviewee.

As a young man, he experienced homelessness, poverty and prison first-hand and used this as the spur for change. His sobering diagnosis is that no major party has sought or brought a comprehensive programme of poverty prevention, as distinct from alleviation. He is right.

The other articles in the current *Journal* provide further examples of

“Are we immersing ourselves in the warm bath of like-minded, perhaps even elitist, views rather than the cold shower of the lived experience of those furthest from power?”

courage in communities rooted in lived experience. Young Fellow and mental health advocate Zaynab ‘ZeZe’ Sohawan discusses her approach to tackling youth mental health issues – an approach informed by her own lived experience as a care leaver with psychosis and autism. Heather

MacRae, FRSA, CEO of the Ideas Foundation, brings us the stunning photography and creative writing of young people documenting life in some of the poorest communities in north-east England.

Looking to the future, we interview the RSA’s new Chair, Loyd Grossman, whose glittering career has straddled so many of the core interests of the RSA, including as a businessman, musician, author and television personality. Finally, young Fellow Samantha Tauber offers us a futuristic perspective on the fortunes of our planet, viewed from space, courtesy of her digital avatar, VNCCII.

As hard as it is, perhaps it is time to change our minds. I hope this final *Journal* of 2024 helps stir us from our cognitive slumber, to wake-up and woke-down, to pull the plug on our warm bath of comfortable and familiar views.

It is important we do so before democracy dies of natural causes. ■

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA.

RSA NEXTGEN

Mental health advocate **ZeZe Sohawon** in the spotlight



Where did you grow up?
Birmingham.

Do you have a nickname?
ZeZe is my nickname, but ZeYnab is my birth name.

What did you want to be as a child and what are you now?
I wanted to be a doctor as a child, and now I am a neuroscientist.

What's your idea of misery?
Being alone. Loneliness is something a lot of young people struggle with these days that is not spoken about enough. As a care leaver, and a child who grew up in care, loneliness really impacted me. I did not have a typical healthy relationship with my biological family.

What's your favourite way to spend a Sunday morning?
Sunday mornings are church and worship mornings. I like walking to church, spending time speaking with friends about faith, worshipping, listening to a sermon and then eating a post-church lunch with my friends.

What are you most passionate about and why?
I am passionate about transforming the service provision for autistic young people with severe mental illness, because I have schizophrenia and complex PTSD. I was sectioned for four years of my life as a teen and I want to utilise my experiences and transmute that pain

into energy that catalyses meaningful change in the world around me. I want to empower other young people to build a life worth living, where their mental health is no longer a barrier to them accessing rich life experiences.

If you had one wish to change the world, what would it be?
It would be for youth to have an active seat at decision-making panels and have youth representatives for each government role. Young people are the future and deserve to have their voices amplified and the opportunity to drive greater change for their generation. I believe having youth at the table would equate to a fairer, more efficient, more just world.

If you couldn't be yourself, who would you be?
Dr Ally Jaffee, an inspirational nutritional psychiatrist. Dr Ally's work is revolutionary; she uses nutrition as a tool to leverage better mental health outcomes, and she is so kind and open with her patients – I would love to be as awesome as her, even just for a day!

What is the one thing every person should be doing to help the planet?
Empowering young people in senior leadership roles. If we help young people to run the world, we will see a lot more innovative solutions to our societal (and global) problems.

Why did you decide to become a Fellow of the RSA?
I became a Fellow to reach more people with my message about changing the world, and to surround myself with a network of ambitious individuals. The company you keep says a lot about who you are, and I felt the RSA Fellowship would be a community which would motivate me to continue making impact and striving to achieve. ■



Scan the QR code to watch ZeZe's TedX Youth@Brum talk

Photo: courtesy of Zeze Sohawon



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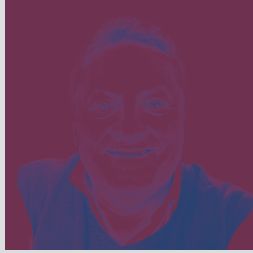


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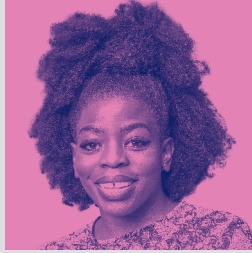
Elizabeth McKay

Elizabeth McKay is Director and CEO of the London Transport Museum. Within the first year of her tenure, she unveiled an ambitious vision for the future, including a new brand, a cultural programme featuring theatre, art and music, and a major capital campaign to ensure that this iconic Covent Garden museum is fit for the future. An award-winning creative leader with experience in museums and heritage, public service broadcasting and commercial advertising, Elizabeth is also an active Trustee and Deputy Chair of Kids in Museums and a member of the Insights Council supporting the English National Opera.



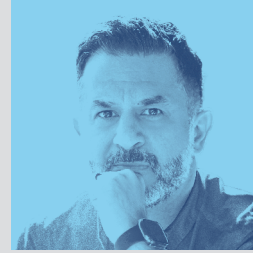
Andy Egan

Andy Egan is President of The Scottish Institute of Theatre, Dance, Film & Television. He began his career as a stuntman but, after an injury, transitioned into promotions, publicity and sponsorship, working with companies such as Fuji Film, BP and British Airways. Andy has won two prestigious Ernst & Young awards, for 'Most Innovative Product' and 'Entrepreneur of the Year'. Andy was Vice Chair of Nordoff Robbins music therapy charity and has been a British Olympic Appeals Council member. He is the founder of Silver Rock Studios, a €250m film and television studio set to open in Ireland in 2025.



Modupeola Fadugba

Modupeola Fadugba is a Nigerian multi-media artist, educator and former chemical engineer. She deploys water as a metaphor for power relations and social exclusion and is best known for her series *Dreams from the Deep End* (showcased in an Emmy-winning film of the same name and featured at Gallery 1957 in London) and *The People's Algorithm*. Modupeola's work explores themes of identity, access and community. She has been represented in major solo shows as well as group exhibitions including: Dakar Biennale, Senegal, 2016; the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, London, 2020 and 2017; and The Armory Show, New York, 2023.



Yamam Nabeel

Yamam Nabeel is an Iraqi, London based writer and photographer. In 2020, he co-founded Art Forward, an art production house which aims to change the narrative about the Arab region through art, telling stories that have not been heard before. Yamam was born in Baghdad in 1976. His family went into exile in 1980 and spent the following 18 months living across Europe and the Middle East before settling in Hungary and then the UK. At age 16, Yamam's short stories were translated into Arabic and published to critical acclaim. From 2003 to 2017, Yamam ran FC Unity, an award-winning NGO with a mission to combat violence, extremism and racism through sport and education.



Pam Smith

Pam Smith joined Newcastle City Council as Chief Executive in January 2022, having been Chief Executive at Stockport Council since 2017. Pam is also the lead spokesperson for economic prosperity at Solace – the membership network for public sector professionals. In April 2024, Pam was appointed Visiting Professor of Practice at Newcastle University, within the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology. Pam led the university town transformation in Burnley and the £1bn regeneration and transformation of Stockport. Working collaboratively across Newcastle and the region, Pam is now leading the city through the new 'Green Industrial Age' as it aims to become a global exemplar for clean energy and sustainable growth.

THE FUTURE

COSMIC COMMUNITIES

What can a fictional intergalactic superheroine from the future teach us about the creative communities that need nourishing today?

Words:
Samantha Tauber





Photo: iStock / buradaki

In 2018, I created an alter ego superheroine character called VNCCII, the protagonist of a science fiction world set in the distant future. The concept for the VNCCII character was inspired by my reading of Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity is Near*, in which he predicted that computers would reach human-level intelligence by 2029. The book led me to reflect deeply on the future of humanity in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) acceleration, and about how humans might become more empowered and enlightened in this brave new world.

This line of thinking became the key inspiration for me in creating VNCCII, who I decided would be a super sentient AI warrior from the intergalactic future whose goal is to be of service to humanity by uplifting the collective consciousness and serving as a guide for personal transformation. How would she do this? By empowering music with positive social messages, inspiring science fiction world-building and fostering human connections via transcendent art and immersive storytelling.

Mission VNCCII

But a reasonable question is: why? Well, at its core, the VNCCII project is an endeavour in creative leadership – one that seeks to activate a harmonious global community with the intention to drive forward our positive future through art. I believe that, in today's fast-paced, hyper-connected world, old paradigms are no longer sufficient, and there is an increasing need to embrace authenticity, self-realisation, universal truths, empathy, collaborative innovation and a sense of global interconnectedness. This interconnectedness can be linked to the idea of 'oneness' – the belief that we are all part of one human family living on spaceship Earth.

To create my avatar, I fused my passion for futuristic world-building and science fiction, with my background as a singer-songwriter, music producer, live performer, creative director and multimedia storyteller. (VNCCII's name was inspired by the creative polymath Leonardo da Vinci, whose pursuit of deep learning across various disciplines I especially admire.) To make VNCCII truly come to life, I have spent the last decade teaching myself skills in music production, motion capture, live show performance builds, digital art and 3D computer graphics software. These technological tools have supported my larger purpose and art: creating stories that combine the imagination with pragmatic next-gen emerging technologies to transform the world. ▶

Blended realities

During the era of global pandemic lockdowns, musicians worldwide were searching for new ways to monetise and connect with their fans and communities. It was during this time that the term Metaverse gained renewed prominence, especially after Facebook's rebrand to Meta and the rise of platforms such as Fortnite for virtual concerts. The VNCCII project experienced exponential growth during this era of cultural transformation. I began piloting my avatar in real time utilising face and body motion capture tools and Unreal Engine: a powerfully diverse 3D computer graphics software for XR (mixed reality) and virtual production content that empowers creators to build virtual games, digital simulations and environments, as well as interactive and cinematic content.

I discovered a unique pipeline for broadcasting live motion capture content as VNCCII where I would stream live via Unreal Engine (using body and face motion capture) and interact with other streaming platforms to perform live VNCCII music performances and DJ sets and to host my podcast, *Future Humans*. In my podcast, I invite guests (such as Blue Origin astronaut Chris Boshuizen and futurist and Metaverse expert Cathy Hackl) to discuss the future of humanity and emerging technologies.

When I perform my music live, I embody the spirit of the fictional avatar character in costume, performing alongside my digital twin, which features both pre-recorded animations and live motion capture. The true magic happens when the physical and digital elements work together seamlessly in a symbiotic relationship.

Home away from home

As VNCCII's influence and presence in the fictional and virtual communities grew, I was able to discover my real-life communities as



Above:
The VNCCII
avatar

Right:
Performance
for Athens XR
Summit at Hellenic
Cosmos Cultural
Center

Samantha Tauber, both virtually in the Metaverse and physically within the space industry. In both spaces, I began to meet people with a like-minded spirit of positive futurism and an open-source mindset. I believe those of us who participate are part of a new creative renaissance, a fusion of both the physical and the digital. The digital age is dissolving traditional boundaries, be it on an individual, community, societal or even global level.

From an artist's perspective, the ability to express oneself creatively through the digital landscape unlocks a sandbox of opportunities for the

imagination. The Metaverse isn't merely the next iteration of the 3D web, it represents a profound shift in how we interact and navigate the fusion of both the digital and physical worlds. Cutting-edge technologies such as blockchain, virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, AI and cloud computing are powering this transformation. These next-gen communities are exploring the positive symbiotic potential of AI to enhance, not limit, our humanity. These communities are also illuminating the ethical considerations in the digital world with 'lifeforms' such as AI.

As an author, my science fiction envisions a world in which technology has the potential to become self-aware, seamlessly integrating our spiritual alignment with the universe. As quantum physics continues to reveal, we are not separate from one another – whether at a subatomic level or within the vastness of cosmic events.

Earthly ties

In keeping with the ethos and spirit of VNCCII, and to manifest this creative vision into the material world, I joined several space industry communities. The Interstellar Foundation is a non-profit organisation inspired by the original Voyager Golden Record, which sends messages from humanity to the stars. It comprises a global team and community of diverse experts from various fields who are passionate about space exploration and interstellar communication.

For the 'Aspire One' Mission, for example, Interstellar partnered with LifeShip, UNESCO and Getty Images, to bring content that reflects the rich cultural diversity of human life to the Moon. These Earth-bound space communities are committed to sharing the story of humanity and our collective hope for the future to the stars.

Recommended reading

"The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution by Frank White explores the profound cognitive shift that astronauts experience when viewing Earth from space – what he calls the 'Overview Effect'. This perspective fosters a sense of interconnectedness and a deeper understanding of the fragility of our planet, and can lead to a heightened sense of environmental responsibility through the uplifting of humanity's collective consciousness."

Samantha Tauber

“Earth-bound space communities are committed to sharing the story of humanity... to the stars”

At Interstellar Foundation, our mission is to deepen the understanding of universal communication, promote inclusion and representation in space messaging and enhance STEM and space education accessibility within underserved communities, as well as creatively share humanity’s wish for future generations to the stars.

Through Interstellar, I connected with author Frank White, whose book *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* explores the interdependence of our world. White’s space philosophy emerged following his extensive interviews with NASA astronauts and their descriptive, emotional accounts of viewing Earth from space. In his book, he underscores the importance of each of us unlocking our unique gifts to contribute to the collective mission of uplifting human consciousness and being conscious stewards of the planet.

By viewing the world from the perspective of the ‘Overview Effect’, we can intentionally design a more abundant future for our planet, advancing humanity towards a state of healthy



RSA Space Network

Did you know... one of the Society’s founders was an astronomer?

Now, 270 years later, RSA Space Network is the first space-dedicated group in the history of the Society. Its purpose is to engage a trans-disciplinary community of creators, technologists and entrepreneurs to explore how space applications and exploration can contribute to regeneration, health and prosperity on Earth and beyond.

The RSA Space Showcases are recurring in-person and online events featuring space-infused life stories, initiatives and experiences of Fellows and special guests from the space industry.

Fellows in the RSA Space Network collaborate on space-empowered international projects and initiatives, some supported by space agencies and the UN, to improve life and expand the habitable zone on Earth and beyond.

Any Fellow with an interest in the responsible use of space assets, research and exploration is welcome and encouraged to join us on RSA Circle - no expertise necessary!
community.thersa.org/c/space/





“As artists, we have the power and responsibility to weave the threads of creativity into our collective future”

collaboration rather than falling back into competitive, scarcity-driven thinking. An abundance mindset (recognising that there are enough resources in our world for everyone if only we act as responsible caretakers) is essential if humanity is to advance as a civilisation capable of progressing towards spacefaring colonies.

As Edgar Mitchell, an Apollo 14 astronaut, said after viewing the Earth from the vantage point of the Moon: “You develop an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it.” The Overview Effect is also a beautiful humanitarian outlook reminding us that we are part of a much larger interconnected human family and ancestry of embedded connections. It’s a humbling, but also powerful, realisation.

Above:
VNCCII's
performance
at Metaverse
Entertainment
World Summit
in Monaco 2023

Right:
Tauber
recording
at Air-Edel
Studios, London

Dear future...

My science fiction novel *Galacta.i.ssance and the VNCCII Awakening* will be sent to the Moon in 2025 with NASA’s Astrobotic Griffin Lander Mission, supported by the company NanoFiche. One day, someone on the Moon may read this archived novel, which carries messages of hope for humanity’s future. In January 2025, three of my original musical compositions will be sent to deep space in partnership with LifeShip on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. One of the songs I wrote, *If We Are Love*, features the UK Thames Children’s Choir whom I recorded at Air Edel Studios in London. There is something beautiful about collaborating with others under the shared understanding that creativity can profoundly shape our future. For another track, I collaborated with a wonderful strings group from London called Wired Strings, with arrangements by Rosie Danvers.

As Samantha Tauber, bringing the VNCCII character to life has brought me immense happiness and healing. As artists, we have the power and responsibility to weave the threads of creativity into our collective future. In times when the world feels turbulent and out of alignment, creative communities are more important than ever. By embodying qualities of bravery, resilience, agency and authenticity, we can set a positive precedent for future generations. Doing the creative and pragmatic work is essential if we truly wish to see change in the world.

When communities across disciplines – such as the creative and space sectors – come together, they form a beautiful constellation of collaboration that lights the path towards an inspiring future for humanity. ■

Samantha Tauber is the Founder of VNCCII, a multimedia IP company that creates cutting-edge science fiction content for the Metaverse and beyond. A storyteller, music artist, technologist and futurist, Samantha embodies her alter ego character VNCCII both digitally and in her live immersive stage show performances.



Photo: Michael Cheestham Photography

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People powered

In an age where knowledge is everything, Wikimedia's behind-the-scenes communities are keeping the lights on and ensuring the truth is told

Words:
Lucy Crompton-Reid

Illustrations:
Sébastien Plassard

On the morning of 5 July 2024, the UK woke up to a new political landscape, with 335 fresh faces in Parliament – including a record number of women – reshaping the House of Commons. Perhaps, in the warm sunshine of that day, some turned to Wikipedia, the world's largest online encyclopedia, to learn more about these new representatives. I suspect not many would have paused to enquire how that information came to be there. Only a few could have guessed that a dedicated group of volunteers had spent the night painstakingly updating Wikipedia, fuelled by pizza and a conviction that women MPs deserve to have their achievements documented as much as their male counterparts.

Human resource

When I was approached about the role of chief executive of Wikimedia UK in 2015, I only had the vaguest understanding of how Wikipedia worked. While I knew that the site was edited by volunteers, I had

no idea how the community functioned. It turns out that one of the best things about working for Wikimedia UK is the extraordinary people that I meet, both in person and online. 'Wikimedians', as volunteer contributors to Wikipedia and the other open knowledge projects are affectionately known, come from all walks of life and all demographic backgrounds. They are united by a belief that knowledge should be shared and that free access to information is innately a good thing, because it underpins a functioning democracy.

Wikipedia invites us to "imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge". While that may seem like a lofty aim, Wikipedia's coverage and reach are impressive by any standard. Wikipedia is viewed more than 15 billion times each month and includes more than 63 million articles across 300+ languages. It is edited 342 times per minute and, every month, more than a quarter of a million ►

volunteers contribute to its content from around the world.

But creating access to the sum of all knowledge is still a work in progress. Wikipedia's community strives for accuracy and a neutral point of view, but this is inhibited by systemic bias, exacerbated by the shared social and cultural characteristics of many editors. And, as a secondary source aggregator, Wikipedia is a mirror of our unequal society, reinforcing and sometimes amplifying androcentrism and other inequities.

The pursuit of equity

Choosing to commit one's time trying to address these challenges is, in my view, an act of courage. While it might feel disheartening to hear that, on the English Wikipedia, the proportion of biographies that are about women has only increased from 15.53% in October 2014 to 19.96% a decade later, each one of these percentage points represents tens of thousands of Wikipedia articles, all researched and written by volunteers, and all complying with Wikipedia's policies and guidelines.

One such volunteer working to address the gender gap is Lucy Moore, a British academic and winner of Wikimedia UK's 2022 Wikimedian of the Year Award, who spent much of her spare time between 2021 and 2024 creating a Wikipedia page for at least one woman from every country of the world. Moore's list includes scientists, artists, writers and activists, as well as neglected historical figures such as Julia Chinn, an enslaved woman and plantation manager who was the common-law wife of a US vice president.

Another project working to address Wikipedia's gender gap from the ground up is Protests and Suffragettes, a Glasgow-based social enterprise led by



“I believe strongly that Wikimedia’s unique community remains essential to the creation of a more informed, democratic and equitable society”

artists and activists. As part of their mission to recover and re-voice the histories of women activists in Scotland, the group has hosted a series of workshops on how to edit Wikipedia. The organisers view their contributions as an important form of knowledge activism, enabling them to improve the representation of Scottish suffrage on the open web.

There are many examples of displaced or minoritised communities working to

improve Wikimedia with the goal of increasing their representation online. In 2022–23, Wikimedia UK worked with the Mixed Museum to increase Wikipedia's coverage of Britain's multiracial history, drawing on the virtual museum's scholarly research to ensure better public access to this important but often neglected aspect of our national history. As described by the Mixed Museum's Director, Dr Chamion Caballero, Wikipedia



is a crucial tool for public engagement, but prior to working with Wikimedia UK its pages related to Britain’s racial mixing were “shockingly patchy, dire or even non-existent”.

Fighting for truth

Where information on Wikipedia is missing or incomplete, it is usually because it has been overlooked due to unconscious bias or a lack of references. In some cases, however, Wikimedia can be a target of deliberate falsehoods. This can be a particular challenge during conflict situations or health emergencies, which exacerbate inequalities

and amplify asymmetries in the information environment, and provide fertile ground for the growth of misinformation and disinformation.

The events of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent conflict have, of course, received millions of page views. On the English Wikipedia alone, the main article on the Israel–Hamas war was read more than 30,000 times a day in October 2024. In writing about such events, Wikipedia’s emphasis on proportionality, neutrality and verifiability becomes even more vital, but the history of these articles (publicly accessible to anyone) demonstrates that knowledge is not a fixed mark but something that is negotiated in real time, while real lives are being lost.

During 2024, the largest election year in history, it has been especially important to guard against misinformation and disinformation posted on Wikipedia, as well as to protect our volunteer editors around the world. In the months prior to the recent US presidential election, an anti-disinformation taskforce monitored potential disinformation, which we know is most pervasive when public opinion is deeply divided.

Committed community

During periods of fast-developing and sensitive events, it is often the most experienced and established editors who work tirelessly to ensure that Wikipedia’s coverage remains neutral and based on reliable, verified sources. Some of these editors have been contributing to Wikipedia for more than 20 years and have made literally millions of edits in what can be a thankless and undervalued task. So what motivates them to continue?

For some contributors, it’s about changing the face of online information and increasing coverage of people

from their own background or community. For others, simply knowing that they are adding to the sum of all knowledge is motivation enough. But what encourages someone to start editing Wikipedia and what keeps them contributing might be quite different. I have been struck by the importance of in-person gatherings to create and reinforce a sense of community in a movement whose activities are mainly online. The annual ‘Wikimania’ conference, which took place in Poland this year and was attended by nearly 1,000 volunteers and staff from around the world, is testament to the value of human connection and interaction for Wikimedians.

This human-centred approach makes Wikimedia increasingly vital in an era of machine-generated content, with all its inaccuracies and hallucinations. Indeed, Wikimedia’s reliance on volunteers for the creation, curation and moderation of its content, and its faith in the power and integrity of collective decision-making, has been fundamental to its success and reach. No other information source exists in so many languages, for free, always. While the erosion of trust and trustworthiness within the information environment is a key challenge for all of us, I believe strongly that Wikimedia’s unique community remains essential to the creation of a more informed, democratic and equitable society. ■

Lucy Crompton-Reid is the Chief Executive of Wikimedia UK, the national chapter for the global Wikimedia movement. The charity brings together practical and policy expertise about Wikimedia to demystify and drive engagement in open knowledge through advocacy, education, outreach and partnerships.

Sébastien Plassard’s classically inspired illustrations tackle modern concepts using imagery and linework reminiscent of mid-century drawings and prints.

Liquid legacy

How the RSA encouraged the development of the modern wine world across America, South Africa and Australia - and England

Words: Jerry Lockspeiser, FRSA

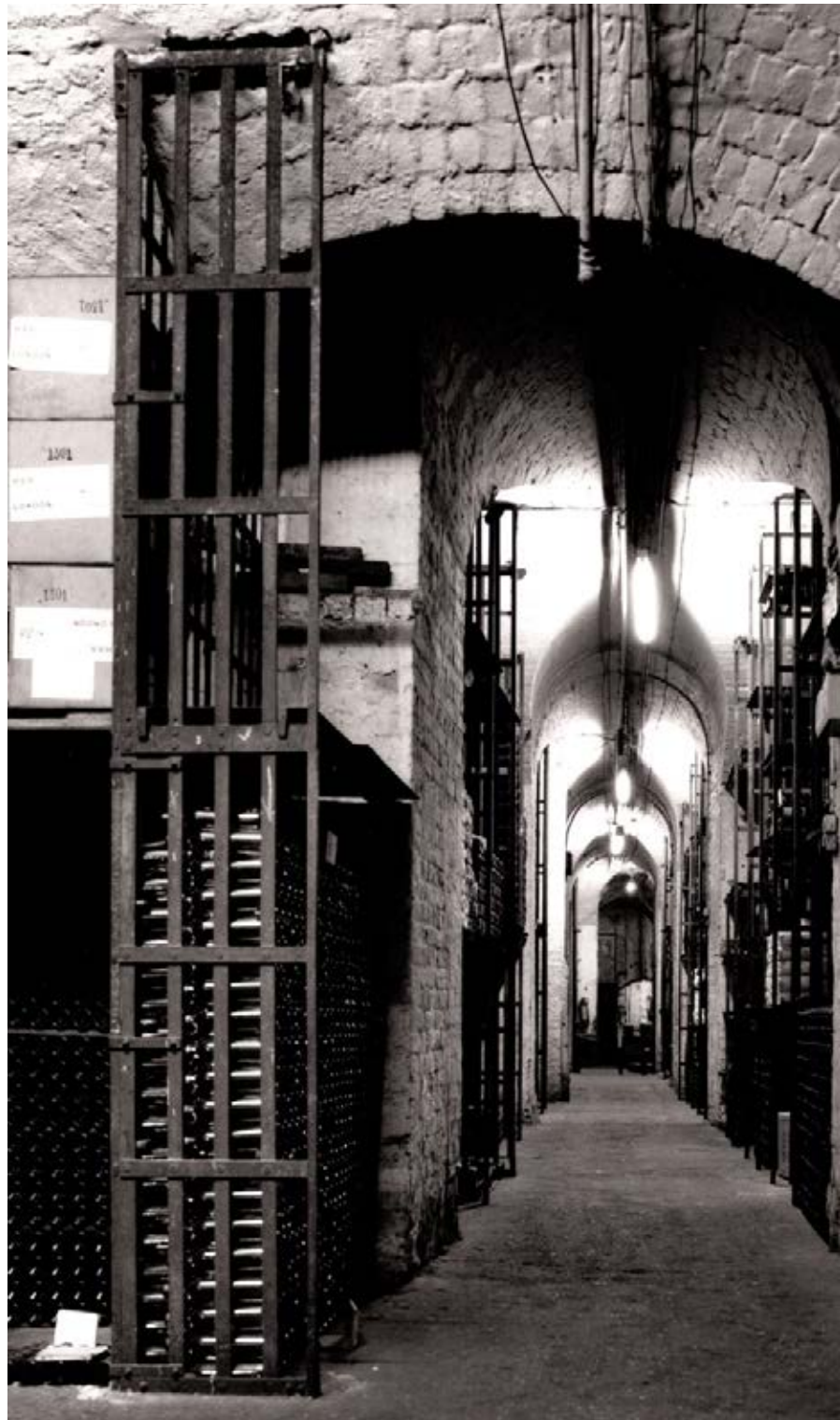
Before the refurbishment of RSA House in 1990, wines were stored in its 18th century vaults. Fittingly, and perhaps surprisingly to some, the Society played a significant role in stimulating the forebears of the modern wine trade.

Notes from the 1887 AGM included in the June 1887 edition of the *Journal of the Society of Arts* state that the Society “has devoted very special attention to the development of the colonies, and to increase their trade with the mother country” and indicate that encouragement was being given across a range of agricultural and manufacturing sectors. In America, South Africa and Australia this included incentives to encourage the planting of vines, later followed by prizes for improving the quality of the wines they produced.

The first prize for wine appeared in 1758, when £100 was promised for “five tuns of good wine made at a plantation in any colony, provided that one tun was imported to



Scan the QR code to read some of the archival documents cited in this article



London”. The winner in 1763 was prominent American politician and plantation owner Charles Carter of Virginia, some of whose descendants still make wines today at the Philip Carter Winery.

In 1823, according to notes from the 1887 AGM, a gold medal was offered

“in an attempt to foster the growth of the vine at the Cape” (now South Africa). Won by international trader Francis Collinson, his wine was examined in London “at the Committee by dealers and other competent judges [and considered] far superior to the Cape wines in general”.



Above:
The RSA House vaults in use as a wine cellar before the 1988-90 refurbishment

Top right:
The James A Stuart designed gold medal

Australian award

In Australia, pioneering viticulturist Geoffrey Blaxland planted a vineyard at Parramatta in 1816. Less than 10 years later, in 1823, he won the Society's first Australian award, also the first international medal given to an Australian wine. As was then typical for wines transported across long distances, Blaxland's was cut with 10% brandy "to enable it to bear the voyage".

Blaxland played a key role in the birth of Australian wine, experimenting with different grape varieties to find those resistant to 'blight' (known today as anthracnose), sharing his findings with the Society and others. His medal-winning wine was made from the variety he found to be most resistant: Small Black Cluster – what we now know as Pinot Noir, the famous grape of Burgundy.

European vines suitable for making wine travelled the world with the expansion of trade. Many were taken from Europe to be grown in England, then on to other destinations. Boats en route to Australia collected vines while docking at the Cape or the Atlantic islands of Tenerife and Madeira.

Economic and population expansion fuelled by the Gold Rush and supported by steam age rail and shipping powered growth in the Australian wine industry from the 1860s. But government regulation, wars, plant diseases and the vine-destroying, aphid-like insect phylloxera sent it into reverse, as also happened in the US and South Africa.

Grape growth

By 1945, wine was at a low ebb in all three former colonies. But post-war and, eventually, post-Apartheid globalisation saw it rise to new heights. The flow of technological ideas, finance and trade transformed both wine



“Perhaps surprisingly to some, the Society played a significant role in stimulating the forebears of the modern wine trade”

industry growth and consumer tastes. Today, Australia is by far the largest supplier of wine to the UK (South Africa is currently sixth, the US is seventh).

In England, too, the wine industry leapt forward. In 1973, there were about 240 acres of vines across England. Today, there are 10,000 across England and Wales (with the vast majority still in England). While this quantity remains very small compared to major producing countries, defeating top Champagnes in recent tasting competitions testifies to the quality of the best English sparkling wine.

And perhaps not for the first time. In 1952, Major-General Sir Guy Salisbury-Jones founded Britain's oldest existing commercial vineyard at Hambledon in Hampshire. In a 1973 address to the RSA, he cited Surrey vineyard owner Charles Hamilton claiming in

1789, with no little hubris, that “it would be endless to state how many good judges of wine were deceived by my wine, and thought it superior to any Champagne they ever drank”.

Today, Champagne companies are buying land in England. Global warming threatens the viability of production in the ‘new world’. After decades of rising consumption of wine since its popularisation in the 1970s, the UK's favourite alcoholic drink is now experiencing a serious decline in sales. With wine seemingly entering another new phase, perhaps the RSA's encouragement of the sector will be needed again. ■

Jerry Lockspeiser, FRSA, is a wine business entrepreneur, writer for *Harpers Wine & Spirit*, Director of Positive News, and Chairman of North South Wines. He has written two books on wine and one on his other passion, running.



“We have to find a way of breaking the inheritance of poverty. That means we have to move all of the resources that are being scattered everywhere. We need to concentrate”

Artist, novelist, raconteur, social entrepreneur and Founder of *The Big Issue* **Lord John Bird** talks with RSA Chief Executive **Andy Haldane** about his journey from privation to the peerage – and what it will take to end poverty once and for all

Photos: Jooney Woodward

Andy Haldane: John, welcome to the RSA. We're going to chat about courageous communities. I know your history, but not everyone might.

John Bird: I was born just after the Second World War, in 1946, into a London Irish slum family in Notting Hill. At the time, it had the highest infant mortality rate, apparently, of anywhere in the UK. If you wanted to murder your kids, you moved to Notting Hill. We had two rooms in this collapsed property, which had sagging roofs, blocked drainpipes, bits of board instead of glass, rats, mice, lice, fleas – and one toilet for eight families. I like to say I was born into a collapsed civilisation, a thrupenny bus ride from Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. It was the maddest place to be born. ▶

Haldane: From Notting Hill to where after that, John?

Bird: We were thrown out when I was five because my parents weren't very good with money. They had three children, then four and then five and then six. We then lived in a gap in the roof of my grandmother's slum cottage around the corner before we moved to another slum, and then we were thrown out of there because we didn't pay the rent. We ended up in a Catholic orphanage in North London where I was for about two years. I went in quite a reasonable human being, and came out nasty and aggressive.

Haldane: When did things take a turn for the better?

Bird: I spent from 10 to 15 being excluded from school and then being brought before the magistrates for stealing. Every time I got done, they taught me something. By the time I was 15 and had left school, I was quite reasonably educated, because I'd been through these institutions. Eventually, I ran away from the young offenders institution and ended up in a boys' prison, where I was taught to refine my reading, because I was dyslexic.

I was there for a couple of years and I became this obsessive painter and drawer. When I came out, I had an enormous portfolio. I walked up the Kings Road one day and started going to life-drawing classes, pretending I was an art student. I was working for the Royal Borough of Kensington as a garden labourer and I got a place at Chelsea School of Art and, wow – that was when I moved inexorably from being a working-class boy into a middle-class boy. That's when things started opening up for me.

Haldane: So, art and literature were the key to the corner being turned in your case?

Bird: I wrote my first novel when I was 17 and I've been writing books ever since. I've been painting and drawing, I've had exhibitions, and people say, "Oh Johnny Bird, you're a wonderful social entrepreneur!" I say, "I'm a failed artist."



Above:
Begorrah, by
John Bird

Haldane: The theme for this edition is 'courageous communities'. What's the most courageous thing you've done in your career?

Bird: After I'd become an art student, I ran away to Paris, met a load of haute-bourgeois Marxists, and, in the space of three months, stopped being an anti-Semite, anti-Black, anti-Indian, and became a Marxist internationalist. That was the most courageous thing, because when I came back to England, I couldn't talk to my family as they held very racist ideas. I couldn't talk to the people I grew up with. I had no friends, but I stuck it out. That two or three years was the only time I ever felt really on my own. Courage is when you know you're doing the right thing, but there's nobody with you.

Haldane: Let's talk about *The Big Issue*. Was that inspiration striking?

Bird: I am not the Mother Teresa of Fulham Broadway. I'm a very simple sort of geezer. The idea did not come to me – it came from Gordon Roddick [Founder of the Body Shop – Ed]. He was in New York in 1990 and saw a street paper called *Street News* being sold by a guy who had been in and out of prison. He said the street paper lifted him out of stealing and made him feel kind of honourable, and Gordon thought this was brilliant. He came back to the UK and spoke to all the major charities about starting a street paper – none of them would touch it.

Their argument was: why would you give somebody the opportunity to make money selling a street paper when they'd spend it on drink or drugs? I said, "What do you think they're doing at the moment? They're robbing old ladies, breaking into shops. I'm going to decriminalise them. When they buy my street paper, they're going to be able to say 'I earned this money. If I put it up my nose at least I haven't stolen it from somebody else.'" The only people they would be harming is themselves.

And this resonated. Margaret Thatcher thanked me, Norman Tebbit was, "Wow, hallelujah" and [Tony] Blair, he was all over me. And all I was doing was something simple. I was giving the homeless the chance of decriminalising themselves.



Scan the QR code to watch the expanded interview and others in our 'In conversation' series



“Courage is when you know you’re doing the right thing, but there’s nobody with you”

Haldane: More than that though, you created an army of social entrepreneurs like yourself.

Bird: *The Big Issue* is good, bad and indifferent. There’s always people looking for perfection. I’ve never been a perfectionist; I’m frightened of perfection. I love the idea that *The Big Issue* is good in parts. I love the fact that we work with people who are going to get into trouble if we don’t.

To me, *The Big Issue* is all about potential. This government needs to get behind the idea of creating social mobility away from poverty. What we do now is spend 80% of our poverty money on keeping people poor. We just give them a bit of money, a bit of top-up. ‘Give the poor more’ is the slogan of both houses of Parliament. I’m in the House of Lords, and the vast majority of the Commons and the Lords are obsessed with giving the poor more, but they’re not obsessed with getting them out of poverty, they’re not obsessed with prevention and cure.

Haldane: There is this idea of *The Big Issue* as a pathway out of poverty. You’re engaging with people across a much wider spectrum than previously, and that nurtures the social skills alongside the money in your pocket that can then serve as the platform. There is good research recently that the key to social mobility is social connectivity.

Bird: Yes, that is really, really interesting. I believe that *The Big Issue* is a national or international network of people in need who are helping each other. As a devout ex-Catholic, I’m a great believer that there’s only one thing we’re here for in this world and that’s to help others. I do believe that you get people at their best when they are helping other people.

Haldane: All the evidence speaks strongly that of all the things we can do that boosts our wellbeing, volunteering – doing something for somebody else – is towards the top of the table.

Bird: But there is a kind of class divide, because it’s those who are having things done for them or to them and those who are doing it, and we have to bridge that gap. My heart goes out when I meet ex-homeless people working with pensioners, or I meet people who have come out of the prison system and they’re working on doing things like cleaning up the environment and helping people who can’t do their shopping.

Haldane: Maybe you’ve hit the nail on the head – is a courageous community one with lots of courageous people like that in it?

Bird: Yes, you park your own dissatisfactions



“You’ve got eight government departments dealing with poverty. It’s a ridiculous situation”

with life. I meet so many people who are in the wrong relationship, who are in the wrong job, and I say, you might get a different outlook on life if you were also thinking, what can I do with the spare time that I have? If you ever talk to the volunteers, they’re totally and utterly committed, and their lives are enriched by it.

Haldane: We’ve got lots of communities, though, across the world, where those ‘pro-social’ behaviours aren’t ruling the roost. We’re seeing anti-social behaviours springing up in communities. How can we get more of the pro-social behaviours that you’ve been talking about?

Bird: I bet you a pound to a penny that virtually all of those people are people who come from the inheritance of poverty. Poverty distorts your life. Poverty destroys your mind. Poverty can make you into a saint or a sinner.

Forty per cent of government expenditure

is spent on poverty, and yet we don’t have a department or a place in government to sort out poverty. You’ve got eight government departments dealing with poverty. It’s a ridiculous situation. It’s scattergun. We’ve got a real problem in the UK, and that is that we’re not doing something to break open the poorest communities and make them work as communities.

Haldane: Here’s the bridge, then, because you’ve been making the case for a ministry for poverty prevention and cure. I’ve been making the case that we need a strategy for social connection. Who’s in charge of social connection and cohesion in the UK? Everyone and, therefore, no one.

Bird: Yes, that’s right. No government has ever really tackled the major problem – the inheritance of poverty, the fact that you inherit poverty from parents who were former children of people in poverty. Forty years ago, maybe a bit longer, you could be poor, but you’d be the working poor. Thatcherism destroyed the working poor in large areas. That was a major, major mistake.

We have to find a way of breaking the inheritance of poverty. That means we have to move all of the resources that are being scattered everywhere. We need to concentrate.

Haldane: There’s the nine million currently counted as economically inactive, not seeking work or training. What can we do differently in schools, communities, the world of work, to create those pathways, to break that inheritance of poverty?

Bird: If I were prime minister, the first thing I would do is a social audit of what works and what doesn’t work in government provision. You have about £400bn a year being spent on the collateral damage done by poverty. The first thing I’d want to know is, what’s working? You can’t fix anything until you know why it’s not fixed.

You’d find that there are all sorts of things that show we spend our money unwisely. The Treasury is incredibly good at spending money when the shit has hit the fan. They’re really good. Brilliant money, out the door for Covid, all that money it’s going to cost to lock up all those rioters. But is the government any good at preventing rioters? Never.

We don’t look at the humblest of persons and say, how can we morph you away from poverty? One of the reasons is, we don’t look at what works. Look at John Anthony Joseph Bird. He’s in trouble from the age of 10, and a pain in the rear before that. If you look at the ingredients that make up the renaissance of this little chap, it comes from

silly little things like letting the idiot draw, paint, go to life-drawing classes at art school, go to the V&A, buy a book, get a library card.

These are social preventative tools, and we don't use them. The government never, ever, ever prioritises what you might call social restructuring with regards to music or the arts.

Haldane: It's about valuing and nurturing social infrastructure as much as we nurture physical and digital infrastructure.

The youth club, the park, the boxing club, the art club, the tennis school, the museum, the library. The things that provide glue to communities, connection to individuals, that's what our communities need to make them cohesive and nurture that social mobility you spoke about.

Bird: That is certainly the major preoccupation, but you also have to back it with a recognition that most schools fail the children who are coming from poverty. We've got to reinvent our curriculum because our curriculum is not preparing us for the 21st century. We have to embrace the natural intelligence of schoolchildren.

Haldane: And the natural creativity of schoolchildren. A lot of creative subjects - art, music, design - are in retreat in schools. Those courses are not seen as the route map to getting a job, and that's a massive miss. A lot of the work that we're doing at the RSA is about rethinking the educational journey.

Bird: Well, I'm glad you are. Someone's got to. But where were you 50 years ago when I needed you?

Haldane: Well, I was seven. I was at school at that point, John.

Bird: I forgive you.



Above:
Airport, by
John Bird

Haldane: This is the right time for it, though, because the situation in schools is getting worse. These days, you can be excluded much earlier because troublesome kids are costly - the easiest thing is to exclude them.

Bird: We need a revolution in thinking. When people ask me what I want my legacy to be, I say my legacy needs to be that I got people to think. Whatever we're doing at the moment is not working. Having thousands of charities to intervene in the lives of the poorest only really keeps poverty ticking over. If we don't reinvent society, we don't reinvent breaking people from poverty, we're not going anywhere.

Haldane: The last question from me is an RSA question. We were born out of the Enlightenment, and new ways of thinking. But here we sit in the 21st century and the problems are still acute. What's the one thing that the RSA should be ahead of right now to tackle the issues you've spoken about so passionately today?

Bird: The RSA to me has always been about design. I once gave a talk to about 100 design students and they said, "John, what would you redesign if you were going to redesign anything?" I said, "I'd redesign thinking." Thinking socially, thinking creatively, thinking about justice...

The best step would be if the government woke up tomorrow and said, "Whatever we're doing, we're doing it wrong, whatever we're doing, we need to not be doing more of the same." We have this weird world of governments that take on the mantle and the weeds of the previous government. They always have the same departments. Basically, we have the same machinery that was there at the time of Gladstone in 1892.

That is poisoning the way we think because what they're saying is, we have done this this way before and we're going to carry on doing it this way. So, that is going to take a different kind of thinking. Don't tell me what the thinking is because I'm not a thinker. All I know is that the thinking is wrong. I would say RSA, get on with redesigning thinking. ■

Recommended reading

"I read *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, by William Gaunt, at aged 17, and it got me thinking about Victorian art and history, and what was going on just 100 years before I was born - especially as a lot of the artists included ended up in a part of Kensington where I worked as a council labourer at the time." John Bird

John Bird is Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Big Issue* and a member of the House of Lords.

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA.

Jooney Woodward is an award-winning British photographer based in London. In 2011 she was awarded First Prize in the Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize at the National Portrait Gallery with her portrait *Harriet and Gentleman Jack*.

A gala to remember

On 17 October, RSA Fellows and friends – including high-profile names from the arts, industry, media and policymaking – attended a fundraising gala dinner at our headquarters in London to celebrate the 250th anniversary of RSA House.

The RSA’s Patron, Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal, was the guest of honour, and delivered welcoming remarks to the assembled guests, who included *Bake Off* judge and former RSA Chair Prue Leith, Eden Project Co-Founder Tim Smit, Director of the Bradford Literature Festival Syima Aslam and newly installed RSA Chair Loyd Grossman, to name just a few.

Guests attended a lively reception in the newly opened Muse at RSA House cocktail bar, where RSA staff were on hand to promote the offerings in a silent auction designed to raise funds for the RSA’s Pay Fellowship Forward initiative. A three-course meal created by Michelin-starred chef (and founder of Silo London, the world’s first zero-waste restaurant) Douglas McMaster then followed in the Great Room.



The Princess Royal used her welcome speech to formally launch Pay Fellowship Forward, which allows current Fellows to contribute towards the membership fees of those who otherwise couldn’t afford them. In her remarks, she drew attention to the fact that RSA House, after two and half centuries, looked better than ever and had remained a steady bulwark of progressive ideals even as so much of London changed around it.

There were additional speeches from RSA Chief Executive Andy Haldane and Loyd Grossman, as well as an engaging address by Chef McMaster, who explained the inspiration for his mission of zero-waste food production – being challenged by zero-waste activist Joost Bakker to “not have a bin”!

Gala-goers stayed late into the evening, bidding on

Above:
HRH The Princess Royal greeted by guests

Below left:
Prue Leith

Below right:
Syima Aslam in conversation at the newly opened Muse at RSA House bar

items in the silent auction and illustrating the House’s rich history of conversation, collaboration and celebration. Guests were gifted a bespoke cocktail designed exclusively for Muse at RSA House to take home. All in all, it was a memorable evening, one that showed the RSA House at its vibrant and energetic best, and signalled an optimistic outlook for the 250 years to come. ■



Photos: Ellie Kurtz

EYES WIDE OPEN

The Ideas Foundation provides opportunities for students in less advantaged schools across the UK to build creative and cultural capital through workshops and excursions. Its mission? To nourish a new creative generation



■ The words and images featured here were created by young people aged 13 to 16 living in a beautiful but remote area of outstanding national beauty – the coastal region of North Yorkshire, England. Working with photographers, poets and scriptwriters brought into the school by the Ideas Foundation, students from Eskdale School in Whitby and Old Farm School in Saltburn learned that there are different ways to tell a story. They learned how to spot the compelling in what might otherwise appear mundane. Most had never used a camera before.

Inspired by the works of photographers such as Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, and with the generous loan of cameras by Canon Europe, students were able to look at their world through a different lens. Some wanted to capture the physicality of their home turf, its connection with the sea, or the beauty and bleakness of the surrounding moors. Some concentrated on Eskdale School, which, despite a rich heritage, was faced with closure (and, indeed, has since closed). And many brought cameras into their homes or along to activities, working to capture the daily reality of what it means to be a teenager in North Yorkshire.

The works in these pages were originally showcased in *Belonging*, an exhibition hosted at the Pannett Art Gallery in Whitby in May 2024. The works shown here are collective efforts; student groups worked together during the 2023–24 school year as photographers, art directors and models, and on creative writing. ►

Heather MacRae, FRSA is Chief Executive of the Ideas Foundation.

Eskdale School: Madeleine A.; Aysha B.; Ella C.; Ty C.; Katy C.; Emily D.; Zane D.; Esme H.; Faye H.; Skye J.; Tilly K.; Freya K.; Elsie L.; Taylor L.; Beau L.; Sky P.; Zahnoor S.; Ruby S.; Ellie S. **Old Farm School:** Jack C.; Kateleigh C.; Echo L.; Lolah M.; Dylan T.



Finding me,
Is hard.
The me I know is different.
Not the me I want
to show.



"My photos might not be connected
to each other in full, but they are
me, all me. So, I don't care if they
are not perfect. I know I'm not."



When Will I Bloom On?

He gave me those flowers when I saw him last,
We were full of fun and joy, we had a blast,
Now he is lost in the snow and so am I.

I used to call my mates and hang around at this park,
But now I stay alone, swing alone in the dark,
I didn't want to grow up.



The Dog Under the Christmas Tree

The dog under the Christmas tree, next to a cold cup of tea,
Aisha keeps distracting Mum's mood, with the mess, the noise and the demand for food.
Too many kids in the house, not as quiet as a mouse.
The dog is posing for the picture, thinking she's a lot richer,
She wants to go on a walk, over the tops over the moor.



Cold Morning Ballet

There's nothing like feeling the butterflies in your stomach, waking up on a cold morning just thinking about the day ahead. You know the pain in your feet will hurt with dried blood and popping blisters, but it will all be worth it in the end.

Tying the lace ribbons around your achy ankles of the shoes that just never seem to fit right. Posing for those thousands of photos that make it look so easy.

But nobody knows the truth that the more effort you put in, the more effortless it looks.

I'm in a whole different world when I dance, it's like nothing else exists.

Just costumes and sequins and sparkles and me.

Just me in a world of my own.



The place where people belong is now gone.

Community is gone.

Family is gone.

“My parents have always encouraged me to get involved in activities like gymnastics to keep me focused and away from trouble. While I appreciate that, I feel living in the north east, I am at a disadvantage, because gyms in the north east are not as well equipped.”



The Death of a Birthplace

Eskdale, a school of memories,
However slowly the walls begin to crack,
Grey tones paint walls and our minds,
We are like a lost cause,
As rain pours down to the wet and rough ground,
A school being lost with no one to be found,
Eskdale, a school which once kept generations alive,
Dying away.

The Ideas Foundation is able to bring projects to life through funding from businesses and organisations and the generous expertise of professional creatives. This work was made possible with support from the UCB Community Health Fund and the inspiration of photographers Michael Cockerham and Tom Martin, creative writers Adisa the Verbaliser and Ben Worth, teachers Ian Bloor and Katherine Sedman, and of course, the students from Eskdale School and Old Farm School.



The Ideas Foundation invites the RSA community to get involved in mentoring students or providing creative experiences. To learn how, contact: heather@ideasfoundation.org.uk or scan the QR code.

A NOVEL APPROACH

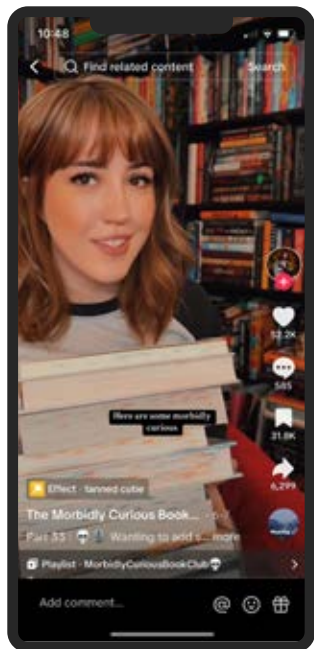
With more than 243 billion views, BookTok has become TikTok's largest online space. But at the heart of this global phenomenon sits a warren of interconnected micro-clubs helping a diverse group of users find both connection and community

Words:
Sophia Smith Galer

Illustrations:
Alex Green

Patricia Brown has what she calls a “mortal job”. “I hate to say I’ve fallen into the trap of corporate America,” the 30-year-old explains, “but there is a part of me that appreciates the nine to five, the health insurance, the cubicle.” All that sounds perfectly normal, but it is not remotely what she is known for online. The minute the working day ends, Brown has videos to make, books to read and 14,000 global members to satisfy – because she runs a viral online book club dedicated to the macabre.

None of which would have happened without BookTok, a TikTok subcommunity where millions of creators and viewers post and interact with videos reviewing and discussing books, literature and reading. TikTok’s hyper-powerful recommendation algorithm ensures users needn’t wait



Above:
The Morbidly Curious Book Club on TikTok

long to be served precisely the types of books they like and micro-communities that best suit their interests. And online users aren’t just viewing, they are buying – year on year, book sales have mirrored the platform’s staggering growth. According to BookScan, BookTok helped authors sell 20 million books in 2021, and in 2022 that number

skyrocketed to 47 million; the sales were driven by over 100 authors with large BookTok followings.

Morbidly curious reading

Brown, who has more than 200,000 followers on TikTok

and Instagram, first started making content during the pandemic, when she was living in Los Angeles and developed a fascination with local true crime. She began to create video reviews about the books she was reading on the subject, but it was only when she created the Morbidly Curious Book Club to better involve her existing community that a larger following began to accrue.

Despite the commercial gains that can come with internet popularity (Brown says the club, which has birthed more than 60 chapters worldwide, has provided her with a small business and powerful friendships), ultimately, the greatest prize has been uniting “people who are like-minded, and who like to read weird stuff”. Whether virtual or in person, she does not believe readers would have heard of the book club without algorithms sending her content to their newsfeeds, and she is probably right. In the age of vertical video, the most successful means of exposure is to create a viral TikTok or Reel, where videos begin with powerful, scroll-stopping hooks, and creators speak directly to potential viewers as though they’re friends.

This is how BookTokers are able to build their enormous platforms at speed – followers experience an intense (and often immediate), parasocial friendship that powers the engine of that creator’s online community. This is also why it’s no longer accurate to talk about BookTok as a single-platform phenomenon. YouTube, Instagram and TikTok now all have powerful recommendation algorithms and short form video products, meaning it is increasingly common for creators to post – and bookish communities to grow – on all three.





The Morbidly Curious Book Club has an overwhelmingly female demographic, joining a long history of women-powered reading communities. In the US, American reading circles emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries with women at

their epicentre, fostering literary and philosophical discussion in parlours as opposed to gentlemen's clubs or universities. In 1839, Margaret Fuller, recognised as the first American female war correspondent, said that in her own reading circle she was

“desirous to answer the great questions. ‘What were we born to do?’ ‘How shall we do it?’”.

The fact that these gatherings carried an element of rebellion or difference was often part of their *raison d'être*. In France, famous salons of literary and artistic discussions

pioneered by women such as Catherine de Vivonne, the Marquise of Rambouillet, are credited with contributing extensively to the cultural development of the country.

By harnessing the power of social media, Brown and other BookTok creators have brought the book group out of the salon and into the palms of millions. For many users, this means being introduced to non-fiction, and the type of intellectual discussions that emerge from reading it, for the very first time. “They’re stepping outside of their comfort zone and giving it a try. They’ve said they’ve learned so much about themselves,” Brown says. “It doesn’t sound profound to most people, but to me that is awesome.”

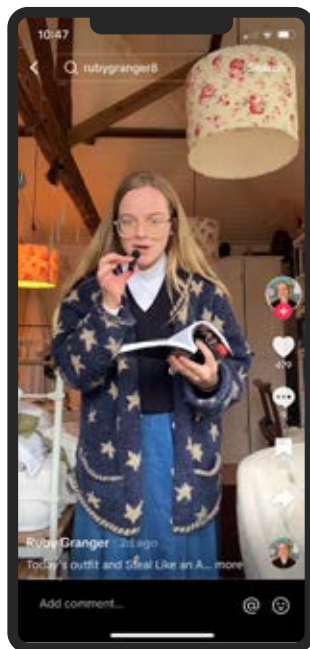
In the comments sections of Brown’s content, it is clear that users finally feel like they have found their tribe. “The algorithm introduced me to your page and I’m hooked,” writes one user. “I would never have picked up *Cannibalism* and it was a great read!”

Finding your niche

The majority of users, though, flock to BookTok to bond about fiction – genre fiction, specifically – and young adult and ‘romantasy’ are two extremely popular sub-genres on the platform. Ruby Granger is known online in the UK primarily for her YouTube content about studying, which she started when she was a student preparing for her GCSE exams. But, in her leisure time, she enjoys content that appeals to her love of “witchy female rage”. As both a creator and a consumer, she agrees that there is an intimacy to the book club experience.

For Granger, this includes in the comments sections of BookTok videos, from where she now gets most of her book recommendations. “Speaking

“BookTok creators have brought the book group out of the salon and into the palms of millions”



Above:
BookToker
Ruby Granger

as someone who was very bookish at school and very lonely as a result, it can feel quite isolating when people aren’t necessarily open about liking reading. When I started making content around books, it was really illuminating – slightly shocking to see that there were so many people eager to connect over books.”

Granger also agrees that most

book content on social media appears more driven by women, both as authors and as readers. But to assume this is an entirely female space would be misleading. Among British teenagers, a poll of more than 2,000 16- to 25-year-olds found 59% said that BookTok had helped them discover a passion for reading over the last year. Tom Ayling, an antiquarian bookseller dealing in rare books and manuscripts, has his biggest following on TikTok, where his videos about unusual finds regularly go viral. He has noticed that he can deploy the algorithm to reach many different social groups; a video about a historic Qur’an can appeal strongly with Muslim viewers, whereas a video about EM Forster’s *Maurice* resonates powerfully with the LGBTQ+ community.

“I use TikTok to introduce people to book collecting,” he says, “and the hope is that the channels across all the platforms will build these little communities of book collectors and make this a thing not done by the old, white and rich but something that is accessible to anyone who is passionate; not even about books, but about a subject matter that can be spoken to by collecting books.”

BookTok has no borders, geographic or otherwise, and content creators’ global fanbases have shifted the meaning of what a book club is. If Covid-19 showed us that we can connect virtually with our communities, BookTok has gone one step further, showing us we can meet and grow community with complete strangers and receive book recommendations we’re going to love. Decades ago, celebrity endorsement was the elixir of life for an author desperate to sell millions of copies. Now, it could be a content creator who is completely new to you, but who has cultivated a rich and eager following of would-be readers and who, in a split second of viral magic, has touched you.

And if you take the next step and prise your reading love affair away from the comments section and join an actual book club because of it, the community you find could be vast. “It’s been an outlet for people to not only explore different things but to learn so much about themselves,” Brown says of her book club. “And I think that’s the best thing I could ask for.” ■

Sophia Smith Galer is a journalist and author based in London. Her videos on TikTok and Instagram have been viewed more than 170 million times.

Alex Green creates rich and thoughtful pieces for editorial, design and advertising industries, live events and murals. His illustrations combine hand drawing, collage and digital techniques.

SECRET SAUCE

New RSA Chair Loyd Grossman talks music, art and societal change, and why he thinks the work and mission of the RSA is more important now than ever

Words:
Nicholas Wroe

Photos:
Charlie Surbey

Loyd Grossman is perhaps still best known for his distinctively accented presence on long-running UK television programmes of the 1980s and 1990s *MasterChef* and *Through the Keyhole*. Along the way, he has also run a hugely successful food business based on his eponymous sauces, worked as a journalist, written several books (most recently on Bernini's role in creating modern Rome), served on the boards of some of the most prestigious British cultural institutions, played rock guitar in a chart band and performed multiple times at Glastonbury.

"I do admit I have rather tried to do things that I enjoy," he laughs, sitting in the Henry Cole Room at RSA House in London on the day his appointment as Chair of the RSA's Board of Trustees is formally confirmed. "My relationship with this

place – something else that has also brought great enjoyment – goes back a while, too, having become a Fellow over 30 years ago now." Grossman had come to London from Massachusetts – the source of those famously elongated vowels – as a student in the mid-1970s, and never really went back.

Boston bonding

It was as an historian with a fascination for the 18th century that the RSA initially caught his attention. "I was much inspired by the fact that my fellow Bostonian, Benjamin Franklin, was one of the first Fellows. But it was the ethos and mission of the RSA that really brought me in and it has kept me here ever since." From the outset, many of those RSA ideals felt familiar to him. "I came from an artistic and charitable family background. I'd always been concerned about broad issues of citizenship, about a sense of

community and civic pride, and I like to do my bit."

In this spirit, and as a by then high-profile businessman and broadcaster, in the late 1990s Grossman founded and led a campaign to support UK museums at a time of challenging cuts in funding. "Museums and galleries, and all the cultural activities in and around them, really do foster that sense of community pride and of belonging. I found that work very gratifying." His efforts soon saw him co-opted onto a government advisory body on museums, and shortly after that he was appointed a Commissioner for English Heritage. "I began devoting more and more time to cultural policy and advocacy and it just kind of grew."

Since then, he has served on many public committees, most recently as Chair of The Royal Parks, centring on arts, culture, heritage and education. He was ►





“I worry that people are losing a sense of hope and, for me, that means the RSA is probably more important now than it ever has been”

awarded a CBE for his work in these fields in 2015.

From this near-unique vantage point, his assessment of the current state of UK cultural institutions is instructive. “They’ve never been more needed, yet they are under a great deal of pressure for all sorts of reasons. There are so many demands on public funding and no politician is ever going to say that health or

the emergency services should have funding taken away from them. But culture, and its institutions, are also vital for the health and happiness of the nation. The link between people’s physical health, mental health and spiritual health is clear. So, let’s take a holistic approach – although I do feel, with public money so tight, we need to develop more philanthropy.”

When the post of Chair of the RSA became vacant, Grossman says, he was immediately interested. “I was due to finish eight extremely eventful years at The Royal Parks and, as you can probably tell, I don’t like being underemployed.” He spoke to his old friend and former RSA Chair Prue Leith (1995–97), “and she told me it was the best job she’s ever had. Added to that, I was already very impressed by Andy [Haldane] as Chief Executive, so I applied.”

Building hope

As he begins his term of office, he observes that: “It is interesting, and perhaps rather frightening, that for the first time both *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* kind of agree that everything’s broken and the world is in a mess. With that sort of narrative coming from both the left and the right, I worry that people are losing a sense of hope and, for me, that means the RSA is probably more important now than it ever has been.

“What the RSA does is all about having a belief in progress. That people have the ability and the talent to improve things and a confidence that we can all play our part and improve society for now and for the longer term. What a vital and inspiring point of view to hold within the context of dissatisfaction with public services, the potential breakdown of the international

“I’m just starting out here but, when my time comes to an end, I hope I can say that it was great when I arrived, and as I leave it’s even better”

order and a culture in which we are overwhelmed with information and, apparently, underwhelmed with wisdom or knowledge.”

He points to two specific RSA initiatives that perhaps exemplify its potential for positive change. “Within the wider Design for Life mission, I am excited by our Playful Green Planet scheme, which connects children, especially those from urban environments, with green spaces and the natural world. It links with work we did at The Royal Parks, where we learned – especially during the pandemic, but it is true more generally – that if we think about access to nature as a last resort, we do so at our peril.”

The RSA Spark project, which will bring together learners, educators and entrepreneurs to unlock creativity across disciplines, is one that also chimes with his outlook and experience. “By 2030, these two projects will be reaching well over a million people from age three

upwards, and will encourage responsibility, innovation, creativity, connection and so much more.”

Other ambitions Grossman has for the organisation include expanding its international focus: “We already have Fellows in well over 100 countries and the digital world makes it essential we have a global presence.” He is also keen to open RSA House to a wider audience. “We’re making a big investment in the Coffee House and the new bar, Muse, with the aim of making our home a resource for all London. You don’t have to be a Fellow to come in, but of course we hope that there will be people who will subsequently decide they like it so much they will want to join us.”

As for personal goals, he says that he’s looking forward to his business’s 30th anniversary next year and he’s still playing his guitar. “I think I’m done with Glastonbury now, but I join Jethro Tull every year for concerts to raise money for UK cathedrals.”



Above: Grossman samples his own home cooking during his time as presenter of *MasterChef*

And, in respect of his tenure at the RSA, he has just one long-term target: “Throughout its long and storied history, whether helping to restrict child labour or creating the Great Exhibition or any other of its achievements, everything the RSA has done has been part of a general desire to simply make things better. Who knows what’s coming down the road, but whatever happens, we have a set of principles and ideals that speak to this noble objective, and I intend to also apply that to the organisation itself. I’m just starting out here but, when my time comes to an end, I hope I can say that it was great when I arrived, and as I leave it’s even better.” ■

Nicholas Wroe is a freelance writer and former Assistant Editor of *Guardian Review*.

Charlie Surbey is an award-winning, multi-disciplined photographer whose work explores forward-thinking styles and the development of new techniques across camera and post-production work.



Photo: Trinity Mirror / Mirropix / Alamy Stock Photo





Photo: Jake Lyell / Alamy Stock Photo

FINANCE

SHARED INTEREST

On the African continent, a microfinance model built on trust – where the community wins or loses together – is gaining in popularity as community banking goes digital

Words: Priyanka Sippy

At a small cafe in a leafy suburb in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's financial capital, a table of 13 women rings with noise, laughter and chatter. Amid the chai, chapati and mandazi (a type of popular sweet fried bread) are spreadsheets and bank statements. Almost two years ago, these women came together to form a Vicoba (Village Community Bank), a popular microfinance model across sub-Saharan Africa whereby a savings group is owned and managed by its own members.

The women have gathered for their monthly meeting to discuss group finances.

Community wealth

Groups such as this take on different names across regions. In South Sudan, they are called 'sanduks'; more commonly across Africa they are referred

to as VSLAs (Village Savings and Loan Associations). These are the small, informal groups, usually formed by people who know each other. But, there are also formal institutions for community banking known as SACCOs (Savings and Credit Cooperatives). While they function in a similar way, SACCOs can have thousands of members and are governed by a board of directors.

These community banking groups allow people to pool their monthly contributions into one pot, which could range anywhere from the equivalent of £5 to £500. These monthly payments – no matter how small they might be – allow people to save, and to access capital they might not otherwise receive.

Crucially, members can take out loans with favourable interest rates and deadlines, ▶

which are decided between themselves and as a collective. Typically, community banks set interest rates at 10% compared to 15–20% from traditional banks in some African countries. In many cases, a Vicoba can be a lifeline – particularly in African societies, where only 48% of the population has access to formal banking. “When you go to some villages in Tanzania, you might never even see an ATM. It means people are in a difficult position to access finance,” says Walter Nguma, an economist who is part of a consultancy firm in Tanzania. Such savings groups are essential to both rural and urban communities in Tanzania, a country where an estimated 14 million people live in poverty.

Vicoba initiatives are growing rapidly in popularity. The World Council of Credit Unions estimates that Kenya

“Perhaps unsurprisingly, a unique bond is formed between members of community banks, who... build wealth together”

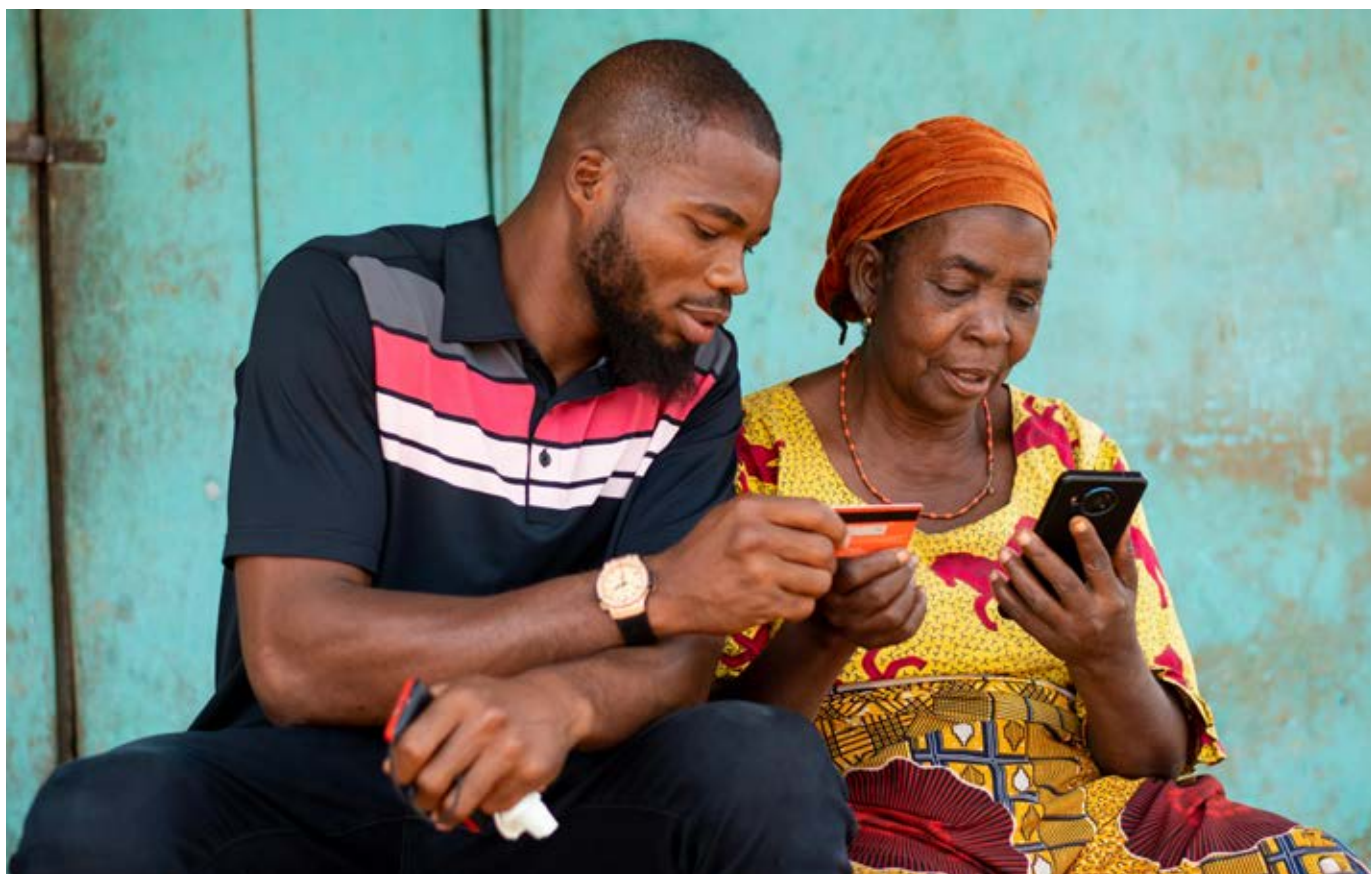
alone has almost 10 million credit union members. For many, being able to save regularly and access loans has enabled members to boost their businesses or cover basic expenses such as school fees, rent and health insurance.

Seeds for growth

Susanne Aroko, part of the 13-member Vicoba in Dar es Salaam, recently used the group to take out a loan to pay a family member’s school fees. She says being able to access emergency funds quickly has relieved her of financial stress. “Applying for a bank loan is a complicated process.

I used to rely on my sister for money,” she says. “But now I can get emergency funds when I need it – and you get it immediately.” The Vicoba is also helping her savings to grow. “I thought of it as an opportunity for financial stability. It creates discipline, as you must contribute each month. From the interest paid on the loans we also benefit from the dividends at the end of the year.”

And the model goes beyond finance – it builds community. Mumu Bakari, a mother of three who lives in Kinondoni, a district in Dar es Salaam, says being part of a Vicoba has also provided her with moral support. She joined the group two years ago, along with 25 other members. “Mental health has been a big problem. But when we meet monthly, it’s a relief. We are mothers, we are wives, so we have similar



experiences, and we support each other through that.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a unique bond is formed between members of community banks, who rely on each other to save, help each other through loans and build wealth together through dividends. By learning about each other’s financial goals, Bakari adds, they become involved in each other’s lives beyond money.

“There was a time when four of us in the Vicoba were pregnant at the same time, and everyone was taking care of us, and checking in to make sure we were OK,” she says. “Then, once the babies were born, we were sharing advice on vaccinations and breast pumps, so it’s been a really good thing.”

Trust issues

But such community banks are not without their challenges. Their greatest strength is also their greatest weakness – it is a model built on trust. Unlike traditional banks, community banks do not require any collateral to take a loan. If someone does not repay, there is little to hold them to account, putting every member’s money at risk.

This is particularly challenging when such groups are run manually. Members are required to do all of their group’s bookkeeping, keeping their own records of monthly contributions and loan repayments. In some cases, they may even have to store currency themselves. But over the past few years, community banks have started to go digital – with a plethora of fintechs and banks offering digital platforms designed specifically for this purpose.

A digital future

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for community banks to go digital. Kwara, a Kenyan fintech

company, is one such digital platform enabling this shift. Founder Cynthia Wandia was inspired to start the company by her grandmother, who worked as a small-scale coffee farmer in Kenya, and was widowed young and left with nine children to look after. Says Wandia, “it was only through a SACCO that she could take care of her family, maintain the farm and retire with dividends. I wanted to make it more effective through technology, and that is how we founded Kwara.”

The platform allows members digital access to financial services that previously would have required in-person interaction. Members are now able to view and download their financial statements, apply for instant loans, and make repayments through their phone or the web. They can also run a modern banking business, where they can register new members through a quick online process, manage their deposits and savings accurately, access credit decisioning, and be compliant with government regulations.

But the digital switch has also been difficult for some groups who were previously not reliant on technology. “Change management has been a challenge,” says Wandia. “All of a sudden everything is being given to a machine.”

Ruth Lawrence, a 32-year-old from Tanzania who has been part of several Vicobas, believes digital platforms have improved community banking. She is part of a 20-member Vicoba in Dar es Salaam. They use M-KOBA, a digital platform started by Tanzania Commercial Bank and M-Pesa, a mobile money service. “When we didn’t use a digital platform, we had a cash box and cash books,” she says. “The difference with using the platform is that transactions are seen by every member, we all see the loans taken out



Above top:
Kwara Co-Founders
David Hwan
and Cynthia
Wandia

Above:
Wandia and
Hwan with a
client

and the repayments made, so it makes everything more transparent and accountable.”

With deposits, transactions and loans all having the ability to be executed online, digital platforms also carry a risk of eliminating face-to-face interaction and regular communication – part of what makes such groups unique. But Aroko, Bakari and Lawrence all believe that the digital aspect will only enhance the bond between Vicoba members, as it helps such community banks to be run more efficiently.

“Without trust, it can be catastrophic. It happens. But when it works well, it creates relationships,” says Lawrence. Going forward, the challenge may be how community banks can continue to build those relationships while moving towards a digital future. ■

Priyanka Sippy is a multimedia journalist focusing on Africa. She has reported from Tanzania, Kenya and Ivory Coast for broadcasters and publications such as the BBC, Al Jazeera, TRT, *New Internationalist* and *World Politics Review*. Previously based in Dar es Salaam and Berlin, she currently reports for the BBC World Service in London.



A stitch in time

Diana Springall, FRSA's world-renowned collection of British embroidery is set to find a permanent home at Sunbury Embroidery Gallery - but urgent funding is needed to ensure the collection is preserved and showcased for future generations

Diana Springall never set out to be a collector.

While today she is one of the UK's most celebrated textile artists and advocates for the art of embroidery, back in 1961 she was a teacher qualifying at Goldsmiths who simply needed some visual examples to show her students when they asked questions about embroidery. "I was a very keen teacher. I started collecting to have actual visual aids to learning." Over the years her compendium grew, and it is now generally acknowledged as one of the most comprehensive collections of British embroidery and stitch-based textile art in the world.

Fast-forward to 2016, when Springall received a phone call from Robert Shaw and Barbara Robertson of the Sunbury Embroidery Gallery, in Sunbury-on-Thames, requesting a viewing. Springall had been thinking about where her collection might find a permanent home; she was relatively certain that an approach to the V&A, which had closed its textile gallery, would relegate her 250 pieces to indefinite storage – a fate she greatly wished to avoid. By contrast, says Springall, once Shaw and Robertson saw the collection, they immediately said, "If you give it to us, we will build an extension."

In recent years, Sunbury and environs have developed as a hub for embroidery, with the Royal School of Needlework, Kingston University's textile courses and the University of Creative Arts at Farnham all

Below:
Diana Springall's
Head of a Girl,
1960. Hand
embroidered on
cotton organdy
on cotton ground



in the area. Given Springall's commitment to promoting embroidery in the UK and beyond, this makes her collection's new home an even more perfect match. Says Springall of the art form: "It's community, it's education, it's the most wonderful skill. You can do it any level and any level is of value."

The new, two-level purpose-designed space will include galleries to display permanent pieces from the collection as well as a large room for guest artists. The addition will also include a workshop and a study space, allowing for the Sunbury Gallery to move further towards its vision of becoming a 'national centre for embroidery'.

Planning permission has been secured for the addition, and the fundraising of a projected £3.5m to proceed with construction is now in full swing. But, as Springall points out, "I am 86 years old, and there is no time to waste." To expedite the process and avoid the possibility that the Springall collection might have to spend an interim period in storage, a corporate sponsor is now being sought to help fund the expansion of the gallery. Springall and the Sunbury Gallery are optimistic that the right donor will be found.

"The collection was built as a testimony to the wonder of this craft as an art," says Springall, "it's a very undervalued craft." ■



To learn more about the Sunbury Embroidery Gallery development, scan the QR code

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Fellowship

L to R: Loyd Grossman, Tim Eyles and Andy Haldane



GOVERNANCE

Loyd Grossman confirmed as Trustee Board Chair at RSA AGM

The RSA's Annual General Meeting was held on 10 October with Fellows from across the globe gathering in person and online to hear updates on RSA initiatives and welcome incoming Trustee Board Chair Loyd Grossman.

Grossman, an author, broadcaster, entrepreneur, heritage champion and musician, was formally ratified as Chair at the AGM, succeeding Tim Eyles who had completed his second three-year term.

In a resolution to approve his appointment, Grossman received 1,247 votes from Fellows in favour, 118 against and 94 abstentions.

In a second resolution - to reappoint Ian Ailles as Trustee and Co-Treasurer of the Trustee Board - Fellows voted in favour by 1,272 votes to 90, with 96 abstentions.

Eyles described Grossman as a "longstanding Fellow with an extremely distinguished career - he has truly diverse skills from which the RSA will be a very fortunate beneficiary". Andy Haldane, RSA Chief Executive, added: "Like his predecessor, Loyd brings a remarkable array of talents to the table, and I can think of no one better to take us on to the next stage."

Grossman is a former Chair of The Royal Parks, Gresham College, The Heritage Alliance and the Churches Conservation Trust. He originally worked in journalism before moving into television as a writer and presenter (see profile of Loyd Grossman on pages 38-41).

In his acceptance speech, Grossman emphasised the word 'encouragement' in the RSA's full title. "I want encouragement to be a really important theme alongside the overriding principles of optimism and connectivity. I want to encourage more Fellows to get actively involved, and I want to encourage more people to know about what the RSA can do."

He described the "difficult context" facing all of us both in the UK and internationally. "People are losing hope - and what we have as an organisation is a belief in the future and, working together, we have the power, we have the talent, we have the will to make things better - and I think we can do that."

Thanking Eyles for his six years as Chair, Haldane highlighted his "extraordinary contribution" to the RSA and praised his "stewardship, leadership and wise counsel".

"The transformation and modernisation of the RSA over that six-year period has been incredible, and none of it would have happened without the rock and the leadership that has been Tim. You have provided the foundations on which we are now seeking to build and to build big."

The AGM also featured highlights from the past year in the Fellowship, including the launch of Pay Fellowship Forward, plus updates on RSA Spark, Prosperous Places and Social Connections. ■



Pay Fellowship Forward, and were delighted by the enthusiastic reception and generous support from Fellows in attendance.

We were particularly pleased that our President, Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal, praised the scheme in her opening remarks and called for Fellows to support it. Every donation is vital in ensuring we can award as many Fellowships as possible.

Do you know of any UK-based individuals who would find RSA Fellowship valuable but might struggle with membership fees, such as professionals beginning their careers, those in high-value but low-paid roles, or self-funding artists, inventors or entrepreneurs?

If so, please let them

know about this opportunity to join the Fellowship for a year free of charge. Applications for the first cohort have now closed, but will reopen in early 2025. Keep an eye out on Circle or the RSA website for further announcements.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss supporting the scheme further, please do not hesitate to reach out via fellowship@rsa.org.uk. ■

Beth D'Elia is the RSA's Fellowship Project Manager.



Scan the QR code to donate to Pay Fellowship Forward

FELLOWSHIP SCHEME

HRH Princess Anne launches Pay Fellowship Forward

Over the past year, several Fellows have approached us expressing a desire to support individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing the Fellowship. In response, we created the Pay Fellowship Forward scheme.

Pay Fellowship Forward is overseen and funded by Fellows, with applications assessed by a committee of Fellowship

councillors. It allows current Fellows to contribute towards funding Fellowships for those who otherwise could not afford the fees, and is open to UK-based applicants who have not been a Fellow before.

As we celebrate 250 years of RSA House, we are seeking funds to cover 250 paid-for Fellowships. On 17 October, we hosted our 250th anniversary gala, officially launching

NOBEL PRIZE

AI pioneer wins share of Nobel Chemistry Prize



Sir Demis Hassabis

RSA Fellow and Royal Designer for Industry (RDI) Sir Demis Hassabis has been awarded a part share in this year's Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his work on protein structure prediction using artificial intelligence.

Hassabis is the co-founder and CEO of DeepMind (now Google DeepMind), a neuroscience-inspired AI company bought by Google in 2014. He became a Fellow in 2009 and was awarded RDI status in 2021 for his work on AI design.

Along with Google DeepMind's John Jumper, Hassabis was awarded a half share in the prize. The other half was awarded to Professor David Baker from the University of Washington for his work on computational protein design.

Hassabis said it was the "honour of a lifetime" to win the award. "I've dedicated my career to advancing AI because of its unparalleled potential to improve the lives of billions of people." ■

Photos: Ellie Kurtz, Duncan Hull / CC BY-SA 4.0

Mentoring programme connects Fellows across generations

In October, the RSA proudly launched our Young Fellows' Mentoring Programme, allowing Fellows to share their expertise with young Fellows keen to build their skills and develop their careers.

At the RSA, we believe in the power of shared skills and experience to help shape the future. By nurturing a new group of leaders, entrepreneurs and innovators, we are creating a unique offering, one that connects Fellows across generations to inspire social impact.

Earlier this year, we piloted the programme with Fellows from around the world. Feedback from this experience was instrumental in creating the new offering.

Young Fellow Freya Johns, Founder of Enid Communications, took part in the pilot working with mentor Andy Marshall, Founder and Creative Director of Harrison Brands. She found the insights invaluable.

"As a young entrepreneur, I've never gone to a class about how to run a company or how to found a business, do business development or even how you write an invoice.

"By engaging with schemes like this, you can take a lot of softer skills and networking from it, but also practical advice in terms of the realities of building a company from the ground up."

Mentors also benefit from the process. According to Andy: "I took up this mentorship position because I thought it would benefit the younger Fellows. It intrigued me, but one thing I didn't realise was how rewarding it was going to be." ■

Emma Land is RSA Head of Fellowship Engagement (Products).



Want to be part of this exciting new chapter for the RSA? Scan the QR code to become a mentor or mentee

Fellowship Annual Survey results



More than 2,000 Fellows completed the 2024 Fellowship Annual Survey, sharing views and feedback

from their experiences over the last year. Overall, Fellows' satisfaction and engagement with the Fellowship increased compared to the previous year. Positive trends were particularly evident among younger Fellows, first-year Fellows and female Fellows.

The survey highlighted the importance of ensuring Fellows understand clearly how to participate in RSA initiatives and feel their contributions are recognised and appreciated.

Over the coming months, we will be improving how we communicate opportunities for Fellows to get involved, ensuring Fellowship is valuable, enriching and impactful for all. ■

Alex Newton is the RSA's Head of Fellowship Development and Services.



Meteoric rise as space group becomes a network

The RSA Space Interest Group began as a community of Fellows who gathered informally to discuss the world of space and the space industry. Following its inception, the group saw rapid growth on Circle, quickly becoming the fourth most popular conversation spot on the platform. In November, it reached a significant milestone by evolving from an interest group into a formal RSA network.

The group's first event, held in July, was a sold-out success, with attendees filling The Steps to capacity. Fellows including Adrian Bowyer, Ana Stan, Daniel Costache, Flow Collingwood, Lucy Mason and Vanja Garaj provided thought-provoking insights into the future of space exploration.

Building on this momentum, the network has an exciting calendar of events in the months ahead. On 11 December, it will host Space for Health, followed by Space for Prosperity and Space for Regeneration.

According to original founder Silviu Pirvu, the Space Network will play a key role in expanding the RSA's transformative mission beyond Earth. "It will connect Fellows of all backgrounds and their space-infused ideas, initiatives and inspiration to make space an enabler for health, regeneration and prosperity." ■

Jessica Robson is the RSA's Community Manager (Global).

Photos: akinostanci/iStock, NASA on Unsplash



Sir Sonny Ramphal



Sir Kenneth Grange

OBITUARY

Tributes paid to two 'giants' in their fields

Tributes have been paid to two inspirational RSA Fellows who passed away earlier this year following remarkable careers in very different professions.

Sir Shridath 'Sonny' Ramphal, former Guyanese politician and Commonwealth Secretary-General from 1975 to 1990, died, aged 95, in August. He was awarded the RSA's Albert Medal in 1988 for his "outstanding contributions towards accord within the Commonwealth, and his promotion of the worldwide concept of our inseparable humanity".

Sir Sonny was a tireless advocate for justice and equality, and championed the fight against racism in South Africa. He also initiated early efforts to tackle climate change and launched programmes to address the challenges faced by small states.

The current Commonwealth

Secretary-General, Baroness Scotland, described Sir Sonny as a "giant of the Caribbean" who had left an "indelible mark" on international relations.

"His legacy is one of unity, hope and a relentless pursuit of a more just and equitable world, with an influence which extends far beyond the Commonwealth."

In July, Sir Kenneth Grange, the industrial designer, co-founder of the agency Pentagram and Royal Designer for Industry (RDI), died, aged 95.

Grange was renowned for his designs of household items such as kettles, food mixers, cameras, irons and washing machines. He also designed the interior layout and external shaping of the InterCity 125 high-speed train and a version of the London taxi.

According to Sam Hecht RDI, co-founder of the Industrial Facility studio, Grange was a "giant of a generous man", who continued to encourage and inspire future generations of industrial designers long after he retired.

"His way was not of seeing design as merely a service to business, but as a responsibility to the people who would use and experience his work, whether riding in a London cab, carving a turkey, taking a photograph or travelling on an InterCity 125 train. He made us all enjoy doing these daily things that ultimately contribute to our culture." ■

MERCHANDISE

RSA online shop launched

Local Fellowship meetings bring people together. At a London gathering in June, Eva Pascoe and Vicki Thomas shared their experiences of designing sustainably in the fashion, gift and toy industries. Vicki was keen to open a conversation to involve the RSA in a celebration of the centenary (in 2025) of the social anthropology underlying the gift economy. There seemed to be a synergy.

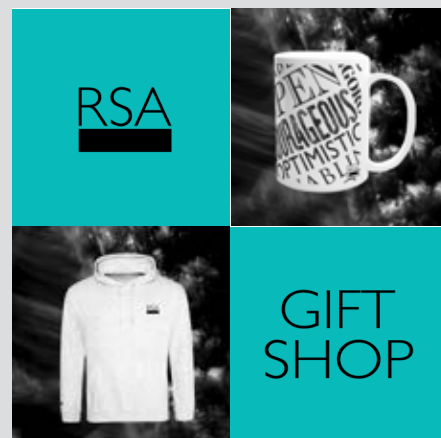
It was then that the RSA decided to explore the benefits of restoring the production of a merchandise collection. Eva kindly put the Fellowship team in touch with Vicki and Isobel Bushell, a graphic designer and illustrator, in the hope there could be a collaboration and they could share their experiences in gift production and graphic design.

As a result, Isobel is now part of a team of Fellows and RSA staff that developed a pilot collection in November, featuring branded clothing, accessories and greeting cards that include amazing images from our archive.

The RSA has designed a collection and sourced ethical and sustainably aligned producers to create a pilot range that Fellows will want to buy for themselves and as a gift for others. ■



Scan the QR code to visit the RSA online shop



Photos: Simon Burt/Shutterstock, Mark Whitfield/Shutterstock

RDI status granted to seven inspirational designers

'Inspirational' and 'outstanding' designers from a range of disciplines have been awarded Royal Designer for Industry status – regarded as the highest honour a designer can receive in the UK.

There are three new UK Royal Designers for Industry (Shona Heath, Lucy Musgrave and Tom Stuart-Smith) and four non-UK honorary RDIs (Michael Beirut, Michael Levine, Julia Lohmann and Clary Salandy).

Heath was recognised for her work in film production, most recently on *Poor Things*, for which she won an Oscar and Bafta for production design; Musgrave, founding director of design consultancy Publica, for promoting excellence in urban design; and Stuart-Smith for his award-winning garden designs.



Lucy Musgrave

The honorary RDIs represent equally diverse disciplines: Beirut for his influential work as a graphic designer; Levine for creating costumes and sets for the world's top opera houses; Lohmann for regenerative design using flora and fauna; and Salandy for carnival arts and costume design.

"The seven designers we have selected are an outstanding group and an inspiration to all of us. We were looking for designers who demonstrated a career of sustained

excellence, and, my goodness, they all tick that box," Charlie Paton, the Master of the Faculty of Royal Designers, told the *Journal*.

They were chosen for their high-quality design, for the measurable impact of their contribution and for having a career of sustained excellence. Their work also had to align with the climate change, environment and social justice agendas of the RSA and the Faculty of Royal Designers.

"They are a diverse group – working across film production, urban neighbourhoods, landscape architecture, graphics, costumes and sets, the natural world and carnivals – who will add to the breadth and quality



of the faculty," Paton added.





The seven new RDIs were due to be welcomed to the faculty at the annual RDI Address at RSA House on 28 November – with the address delivered by Tom Stuart-Smith, newly recognised as an RDI, and Sue Stuart-Smith, psychotherapist and author of *The Well Gardened Mind*. ■



Tom Stuart-Smith

FELLOWSHIP CONNECT

Explore opportunities to connect online:

 @thersaorg	 Fellows' LinkedIn group linkedin.com/groups/3391
 @theRSAorg	
 @thersaorg	

■ Email the Fellowship Services team at fellowship@rsa.org.uk or call +44 (0)207 451 6939

CIRCLE OF FELLOWSHIP

Join Circle today and get your conversation started:

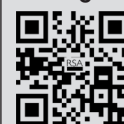
To activate your Circle account, log in through My RSA via the RSA website. Your global community awaits.



To get started, scan the QR code or visit thersa.org/fellowship/community-platform

FREE CO-WORKING SPACES AVAILABLE

There are 12 co-working locations available across the UK where non-London-based Fellows can work for free – and we regularly add new venues.



For the latest information, please scan the QR code

LAST WORD

We all love a present. But, this season, spare a moment to consider the many greater social goods that come from giving

Words:
Vicki Thomas, FRSA

Vicki Thomas is founder of the research and design consultancy Vicki Thomas Associates, which is celebrating, with others, 'The Year of the Gift' in 2025.

When I make something for my family, I put love in – by taking my time to create something special just for them. Equally, I appreciate when someone has bought a present for me that speaks of our relationship. It is the silent understanding that counts.

A century ago, in 1924, Marcel Mauss argued that gifts contain a spirit or 'Hau'. For him, this spirit was the obligation to make a return gesture, but not something to be understood simply as a debt. Mauss saw gift exchange as, on balance, a positive social process, bringing communities together and generating trade.

In 2025, I want us to have the courage to celebrate the role of the gift exchange in our communities. By 'us', I mean those involved in the service, manufacturing and retail industries, not-for-profits and charities, education, and bodies such as the RSA.

Just think of the multiple ways gift-giving impacts and surrounds us every day. Presents are exchanged as part of rituals to celebrate 'rites of passage'. They mark seasons, travels, achievements, movement through life's different stages. Giving builds a sense of belonging and goodwill and encourages the funding of good causes.

Powerful bodies display their status and wealth by what they choose to give. To avoid corruption from gift-giving, we have laws and ethical codes; we lampoon

those who bend the rules by being ostentatious in their generosity or who are ungracious in their receipt of gifts – they are not acting in the right spirit. Some might claim that gifts are unnecessary and wasteful, but our antique shops and museums tell a different story. They are full of artefacts created to be given and made only more valuable when their provenance and the story behind their creation are known.

Lewis Hyde took Mauss' ideas further, exploring how presents are not just things: one can also give knowledge, talent or time. The spirit is integral to the very form and nature of gifts. You either make something or commission a more gifted person to do so, order an item online or hunt through shops for something on a loved one's wish list. However the gift is created, chosen and presented, it is imbued with a spirit that transforms it into something that transcends its physical nature. The 'Hau' is not written on a gift tag but integral to the very form and nature of that which is given.

So, anything can be a gift, but it must be given in the right spirit. It must have value and communicate, whether a story or a thought, your support or love to the recipient. In 2025, we should have the courage to celebrate, not denigrate, this vital social process, and to promote the positive role giving plays in our communities and economies. ■



MUSE

AT RSA HOUSE



Muse at RSA House is a new bar designed for Fellows and friends to enjoy delicious cocktails in our historic London home. Launched in November 2024, Muse is London's newest cocktail oasis.

In line with the RSA's regenerative charitable mission, our dedicated team of bartenders focus on traceability and sustainability, breaking down the provenance of each drink, from cocktail ingredients to wines and spirits, through to our selection of delicious British ciders.

Monday–Friday, 4pm–11pm. Walk-ins welcome, reservations recommended.



WHERE MEMORIES ARE MADE



Photo: Helen Abraham

Exclusive use of our award-winning Georgian townhouse for your wedding day. Dance the night away in our underground vaults, the coolest after-party venue in London. To enquire, email the wedding team quoting 'RSA Journal Best Day Ever'.

RSA House won bronze last year at the London Venue Awards for Best Wedding Venue.

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