

Forty years of BAMS

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What follows is a condensed version of a talk I gave last year at the annual conference of the British Art Medal Society (BAMS) in Chester to mark the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of the society in 1982. As that talk had a limited audience, it is, I think, worth repeating the main points here, for it seems to me that there are ways in which BAMS could offer a model for those countries in which no society yet exists to promote the art of the medal.

We shall begin with a brief survey of the situation prior to the society's foundation. The one organisation to have existed in Britain with similar objectives to BAMS was the Society of Medallists, founded in the 1880s.¹ There are various striking parallels between the two societies. Each had an organising committee that included both artists and academics, with staff from the British Museum taking key roles, both held exhibitions (fig. 1), and each

encouraged art students to take up medallic art, with the Society of Medallists engaging with students at London's Slade School of Art and BAMS setting up its Student Medal Project. A major difference is that, whereas BAMS has engaged in forty years of continuous activity, the earlier society lasted for only around twenty-five, and even within that period there were times when little or nothing happened; it was certainly defunct by the time of the First World War.

Although Britain was represented within FIDEM from its foundation in 1937,² the next initiative to take place within the country itself did not occur until 1955, when the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), an organisation that had been founded in 1754 and had in its early days supported medal production, mounted an exhibition of modern medals from seventeen European countries including Britain; FIDEM was called upon to secure loans.³ There was then another gap, this time of almost twenty years, until in 1973 another exhibition of contemporary medals, *Medals today*, was staged, this time organised by the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths under its energetic art director Graham Hughes. For this exhibition the medals came from ten countries, with the British medals having been commissioned by the Goldsmiths' Company from forty artists, most of whom had never previously made a medal. In the leaflet accompanying the exhibition, Hughes made the point that 'some of the most beautiful modern medals are from countries with a medal collecting society', citing France, Finland and Germany.⁴

Things were now starting to change. Mark Jones was appointed curator of medals at the British Museum in 1974 and began to build up the museum's collection of medals, contemporary as well as historic. By 1979 the collection was such that the museum was able to mount a major exhibition, *The medal mirror of history*, complete with a contemporary section that included medals from twelve countries.⁵ One of the British artists represented was Ron Dutton. By this time Mark already knew Ron and they had discussed the idea of setting up a medal society, which, as Graham Hughes had intimated, might transform

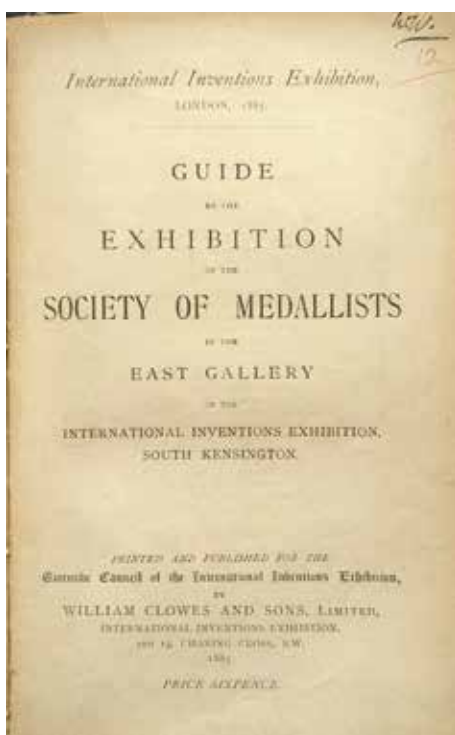


Fig 1. Guide to the exhibition of the Society of Medallists, 1885



Fig 2. The Finnish Medal Guild's congratulatory telegram to the newly formed British Art Medal Society, 1982

the situation in Britain. Ron set about approaching various well-known sculptors such as Eduardo Paolozzi and Elisabeth Frink to gauge interest, and information about how the Dutch medal society operated was sought from Gay van der Meer at the Dutch Royal Coin Cabinet.⁶ In 1980 Ron embarked on a fact-finding trip to Finland and Sweden, partly funded by the RSA.

The following year Helen Auty, assistant secretary in the design section of the RSA, sent a round-robin letter to all those known to be interested in medals, referring to Ron's trip and to his proposal that 'a British Art Medal Society should be founded to promote the medallic art in this country'.⁷ A meeting establishing BAMS was duly held at the RSA on 12 February 1982 (fig. 2) and a



Fig 4. Daniel Fearon's article in The Times, 1983

second meeting, on 27 April, saw the society's founding agreement signed (fig. 3). Among the signatories were museum curators such as Mark Jones and Graham Pollard of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, artists such as Ron Dutton, Fred Kormis and Jacqueline Stieger, manufacturers such as Tom Fattorini, dealers such as Peter Seaby and Christopher Eimer, and collectors such as Terence Mullaly, Peter Bagwell Purefoy and John Cooke. Publicity was an early priority, with an article by Daniel Fearon appearing in *The Times* in September 1983 (fig. 4) and another by Terence Mullaly in *The Daily Telegraph* the following month.⁸ Accompanying Fearon's article were illustrations of three of the first medals to be issued by BAMS. These had been announced in the first issue of *The Medal*: Jane McAdam Freud's *Picasso*, Nigel Hall's *Bronze Shoal*, and Ron Dutton's *Sheep Moor II* (fig. 5).⁹ Commissioning medals such as these for sale to members

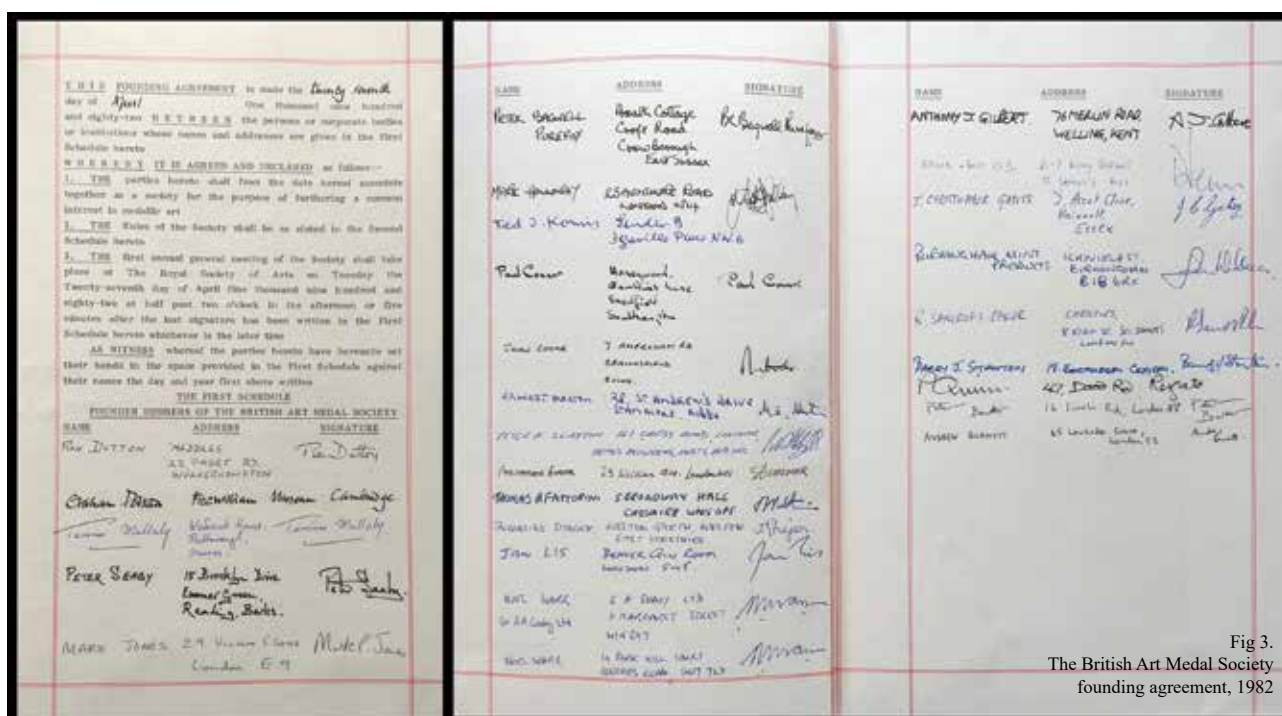


Fig 3. The British Art Medal Society founding agreement, 1982



Fig 5. Sheep Moor II, 1982
Ron Dutton
Bronze, 78 mm

was a key activity from the first. An early coup was the securing of a medal, *Diamond*, by the eminent sculptor Lynn Chadwick (fig. 6).¹⁰ Initially, all the medals were available to members at £22 each, but by the time the Chadwick was issued this had risen to £25; this uniform pricing system became increasingly difficult to maintain and in 1991 individual pricing was introduced. The society has continued to commission several medals each year. In its first forty years a total of 262 medals were issued.¹¹

It was soon realised that the society's commercial activities – principally medal sales – needed to be separated from its charitable initiatives. To this end, the British Art Medal Trust was signed into being on 6 January 1984 to handle the educational and philanthropic aspects of the society's

work. The signatories, and hence also the trustees of the new charity, were Graham Pollard, Terence Mullaly, Helen Auty, Ron Dutton, Mark Jones, John Cooke and Peter Bagwell Purefoy. Although the society had in effect been split into two, it has continued to operate essentially as one entity, albeit with separate accounts and records.

From the beginning the society understood the importance of exhibitions for attracting public interest. Aware of the benefits of learning from countries in which medals were more firmly embedded into the culture, it worked with the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education to mount an exhibition of modern Hungarian medals, which in 1984 travelled to Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Goldsmiths' Hall, London, home of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, Christchurch Picture Gallery, Oxford, and



Fig 6. Diamond, 1983
Lynn Chadwick
Bronze, 76 mm



Fig 7. The BAMS travelling exhibition, Contemporary art medals, at the Barbican Centre, London, 1993

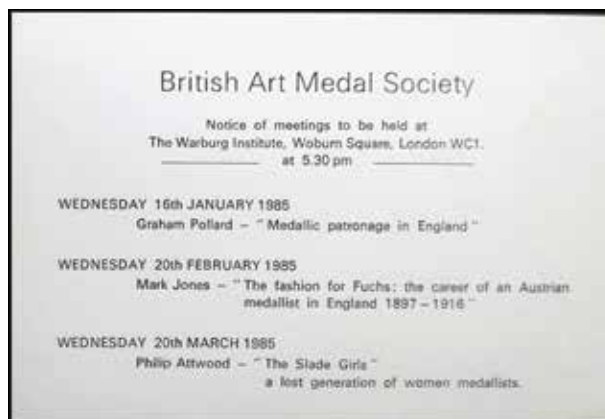


Fig 9. The BAMS winter lecture series meetings card, 1985



Fig 8. BAMS Student Medal Project medals at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, 2010



Fig 10. New Place, Shedfield, Hampshire, 1985

Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead. Following this, in the early 1990s a small and easily transportable exhibition of BAMS medals illustrated their immense variety and was shown in venues as diverse as the Yorkshire Museum in York and London's Barbican Centre (fig. 7). More recently, with the introduction of the BAMS Student Medal Project, annual exhibitions of the work produced in colleges around the country have been mounted in a wide range of institutions in Britain (fig. 8).¹²

Publications have been another important activity. The first issue of *The Medal* appeared in 1982, the year of the society's foundation. A book by Terence Mullaly, *Modern Hungarian medals*, accompanied the Hungarian exhibition already referred to.¹³ Other books included Evelyn Malpas's history of ballooning medals, *Lighter than air*, and two eighteenth-century subjects, Cordula Wohlfahrt's book on the German artist Christian Wermuth and Christopher Eimer's on the Pingo family of medallists from Britain.¹⁴ Later books have celebrated the society's twentieth, thirtieth and fortieth anniversaries.¹⁵

Getting people together has also been a vital concern. To this end, the London winter series of lectures was instituted in 1985. The first series consisted of three lectures given by Graham Pollard, Mark Jones and myself (fig. 9). Initially these talks were held at the University of London's Warburg Institute, but in the early 1990s they were moved to the more congenial surroundings

of Cutlers' Hall, home of the Worshipful Company of Cutlers, where they still take place.

The first weekend conference also dates to 1985.¹⁶ Held in a historic Edwardian country house in Hampshire designed by the celebrated architect Edwin Lutyens (fig. 10),¹⁷ it set the pattern for those that have followed. There were talks on various subjects by scholars and an artist – the glass-engraver Ronald Pennell – also spoke, as did collectors Paul Connor and, from Finland, Ilkka Voionmaa. Ron Dutton led a clay modelling and plaster casting workshop in which everyone was invited to take part. These conferences have continued on an almost annual basis, and nearly all have included talks from a range of speakers and a workshop in which participants have been able to try their hand at a technique relating to medal-making (fig. 11). All attendees, whether they are artists or collectors, are encouraged to bring their own medals and talk about them. Visits to nearby places of interest are arranged (fig. 12) and a convivial atmosphere is maintained throughout.

Time has not allowed me to discuss all that the society has achieved. Notably absent here is any discussion of its Student Medal Project or its New Medallist Scheme.¹⁸ I will conclude with three general points. Firstly, it is remarkable how constant the principles that have guided the society and the activities that it has undertaken have remained over forty years. The founders of the society



Fig 11. The patination workshop,
Portmeirion, 1990



Fig 12. Graham Pollard discussing medals
at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 1995

appear to have hit upon a winning formula. Secondly, it should be noted that, although nominally British, the society's engagement with the rest of the world has played an important role in its success. The membership is international, medals have been commissioned from artists from many countries, and articles in *The Medal* cover subjects from around the world. Moreover, three of the annual conferences have been held abroad, in France, Ireland and The Netherlands. My third and final point is that a key element in the society's success has been that everyone is welcome. It is not a closed shop for artists or a centre for academic studies or a market. It is all of those things. Artists, collectors, curators, dealers, art historians – in fact, all those with an interest in medals – can learn from each other and benefit from the multifarious connections the society provides. As I said at the beginning of this talk, any country that does not yet have its own medal society might wish to consider trying something similar.

NOTES

1. See Attwood, P.: The Society of Medallists, *The Medal*, 3, 1983, pp. 9-11.
2. Attwood, P.: FIDEM and the UK: the first forty years, *The Medal*, 71, 2017, pp. 25-42.
3. *Exhibition of European medals 1930–1955*, London, 1955. Attwood, 2017, pp. 34-37.
4. Hughes, G: Introduction, *Medals today exhibition* leaflet, London, 1973.
5. The medals in the exhibition were listed in a handlist. The twelve countries represented in the modern section were Australia, Canada, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Japan, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, The Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. A selection of the modern medals is included in chapter 18 of Jones, M.: *The art of the medal*, London, 1979, which was published to coincide with this exhibition.
6. The letters from Paolozzi, Frink and Van der Meer remain in the BAMS archive, which is currently held at the British Museum. Along with other documents relating to the society's early years, they are transcribed in Twenty-five years ago, *The Medal*, 50, 2007, pp. 4-14.
7. Letter dated 3 September 1981.
8. Fearon, D.: Medalling in modern art and history, *The Times*, 2 September 1983. Mullaly, T.: A modern way with medals, *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 1983.
9. *The Medal*, 1, 1982, n.p.
10. *The Medal*, 5, 1984, p. 57.
11. Listed in Attwood, P., Leavitt Bourne, M., and Larkin, J.: *Encounters with medals. 40 years of BAMS conferences*, London, 2022, pp. 121-128.
12. For the BAMS Student Medal Project, see the various catalogues, the most recent of which are available online at <https://bams.org.uk/learning/#student-medal> [accessed 22 November 2023]; also, for example, Leavitt Bourne, M.: The BAMS Student Medal Project 1996, *The Medal*, 29, 1996, pp. 97-103; Leavitt Bourne, M.: Living in a world of dangers: student artists speak out, *Médailles*, 2020-2021, pp. 201-205.
13. Mullaly, T. (ed.): *Modern Hungarian medals*, London, 1984.
14. Malpas, E.: *Lighter than air*, London, 1989. Wohlfahrt, C.: *Christian Wermuth: ein Deutscher Medailleur der Barockzeit / a German medallist of the Baroque age*, London, 1992. Eimer, C.: *The Pingo family and medal making in 18th-century Britain*, London, 1998.
15. Attwood, P.: *British art medals 1982–2002*, London, 2002. Leavitt Bourne, M. and Vandenbrouck-Przybylski, M.: *The New Medallists*, London, 2012. Attwood, Leavitt Bourne and Larkin, 2022.
16. For these conferences, see Attwood, Leavitt Bourne and Larkin, 2022.
17. For this venue, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Place,_Shirrell_Heath [accessed 29 November 2023].
18. For the Student Medal Project, see note 11 above. For the New Medallist Scheme, see Ratcliffe, N.: The New Medallist. From flying thoughts to objects to grasp, *The Medal*, 50, 2007, pp. 75-85; Mills, P.: In pursuit of the invisible. The BAMS 'New Medallist' Scheme 2006-7, *The Medal*, 53, 2008, pp. 47-58; Leavitt Bourne and Vandenbrouck-Przybylski, 2012.