

THE CUSSAG AWARD

A brief History of CUSSAG
1995 – 2005

CUSSAG 1995 – 2005

Following an open meeting at Gracefield Arts Centre on 1 April 1995 to discuss the possibility of a University of Southern Scotland based on the Crichton site, Dr Joyce Minton, Dr Neil Paterson and Maxwell (Max) Wallace, were elected Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Press Officer respectively of the newly formed CRICHTON UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN SCOTLAND ACTION GROUP (CUSSAG). Rene Anderson was elected Secretary, a position she held for two years. Neil Paterson and Rene Anderson were on the Committee for the entire ten-year life of the project.

What followed was probably the most amazing show of “pensioner power” ever seen in Dumfries and Galloway. Despite her advancing years, and until her death, Joyce Minton bullied and badgered everyone in her path, starting with the Executives of the Council from the Chief Executive down, Councillors, the Principal of the University of Glasgow, educationalists, parliamentarians and officials of “quangos.” A petition with 6000 signatures had been handed in to the Council before the inaugural meeting.

How their hearts must have sunk when the mail arrived each day. Local and national archives must be laden with CUSSAG papers. Copies of the brochure with which she launched her initial campaign were circulated all over the country and overseas. Her total commitment culminated in her magnificent legacy of some £300,000 to the Crichton Campus

Of course, Dr Minton was not the only one to put pen to paper and to lobby officials. Neil Paterson never took “no” for an answer, knocking on officials’ doors and speaking to local organisations. He made strenuous efforts to forge and maintain links with the Borders. Max Wallace, as press officer, sent out press releases and wrote to anyone and everyone he thought might help or have influence.

Committee meetings of CUSSAG were held all over the region, from Carsluith to Parkgate, wherever a vacant (and cost-free) room could be found. Meetings during those first years were lively and long, often finishing late into the night. The debates were heated, to put it mildly. Max Wallace insisted that CUSSAG must have a high level educational entrepreneur and a development officer to take the project forward. His persistence, supported heartily by the CUSSAG Committee, paid off when Sir Graham Hills was commissioned to undertake a study into the possibilities for a university for Southern Scotland. During his investigations, Sir Graham visited the University of Glasgow before presenting to CUSSAG his report, which forged the link that brought Glasgow University to the Crichton campus. Only ill health put the brakes on Max Wallace’s efforts, although he remained an enthusiastic supporter of CUSSAG throughout its ten-year history.

One of the most exciting moments for those members of CUSSAG who were present, was the signing in December 1996 of the first Crichton Accord with the University of Glasgow, Dumfries and Galloway Council, Dumfries and Galloway Enterprise and the Crichton Development Company. A second Crichton Accord was signed in May 2000 with the original participants together with the University of Paisley, Bell College, Dumfries and Galloway College, Barony College and the Crichton Foundation, but CUSSAG was not included.

On 24 September 1996 Professor William Stevely presented to CUSSAG the University of Paisley’s proposals for the Crichton Campus – another project which had a very successful outcome with the signing of the Paisley Accord in 1999.

Charles Grant succeeded Max Wallace as Press Officer until he moved away from the area. Liam Murray wrote a letter to the local press supporting CUSSAG and thereby found himself Treasurer, a post he held from 1996 to 1999. He quietly brought everyone down to earth when the Committee got carried away with impossible targets. Charles Anderson took up the cudgels and used his considerable banking skills to ensure that every penny was husbanded for the benefit of the Crichton Campus.

From the start, Bill Agnew consistently emphasised the need for social and welfare provision for the students. Councillor Archie Wright quietly but firmly guided the Committee through the maze of Council bureaucracy. William Clerk-Maxwell almost single-handedly organised a major fundraising event, a superb organ recital in the Crichton Church.

There was always a great deal to be done and much debate and lobbying continued through the years. A barrister, John Poole, was roped in to help with the Constitution, to keep the Committee on the straight and narrow (and keep them out of jail!). Like the other Committee members he became hooked and his poor wife, Ruth, soon found herself inundated with letters and documents which she cheerfully typed without complaint.

The first main preoccupation was a bid to the Millennium Commission, fronted by Joyce Minton. Neil Paterson and Max Wallace travelled to London and Edinburgh to receive advice on the bid. Budgetary figures were produced by Graham Trickey (who also worked on the Constitution) and the bid was submitted by CUSSAG and successfully passed the first round. CUSSAG did not have the resources to complete the second or third rounds and had to hand over the reins to the local Council. As no Development Officer was in place in time, the bid was only submitted literally at the eleventh hour and sadly there was no opportunity to change the non-compliant parts. The rejection of the bid was a bitter blow not only to the CUSSAG Committee but to all those who had pinned their hopes on the success of the bid.

Owing to failing health and hearing problems, Joyce Minton stepped down as Chairman of the Committee, a post taken up readily by Neil Paterson, who became Chairman of CUSSAG in 1999 when Dr Minton was elected Life President.

The Committee waxed and waned and at some meetings over 20 attended – an unwieldy number. By no means all were pensioners; they were from many professions and from all walks of life and many of them travelled long distances to meetings.

Peter Robertson of the Holywood Trust ensured that members of the Committee were never without a meeting room in the early days; the Trust also assisted greatly with administrative and postal tasks. Sheila Anderson of the Holywood Trust took over as Secretary until the arrival of Molly Wilson, who succeeded her. Following Dr Minton's death, when Neil Paterson became Life President, David Rose ably took over the Chair until 2003. He liaised with other stakeholders on the Crichton Campus. Professor John Stenlake prepared an influential and subsequently very useful proposal for an international conference centre on the Crichton Campus.

It is not possible to mention all who assisted or became Committee members over the ten-year period. Officials from other organisations were persuaded, coaxed or even volunteered to attend meetings, both as observers and as contributors. Politicians offered support right across the political spectrum. Councillor Robert Higgins carried CUSSAG's message to the west of the region. Struan Stevenson MEP prepared a Scoping Study; David Mundell MSP and Elaine Murray MSP advised on current political thinking on higher education issues.

Whenever any CUSSAG event was proposed, Andrew Endredy was always among the first to volunteer. His was a truly hands-on approach, as was that of Barbara Hargreaves. The Rev Louis Bezuidenhout and Neil Paterson helped organise the Charteris Lectures. With David Rose, Louis involved himself in projects designed to help disadvantaged students in the remoter parts of the region. Roland Chaplain also enthusiastically participated on the latter projects and preached the message of CUSSAG wherever possible. Robin Pollock gave sound business advice. Colin Bryden designed and published the first coloured leaflets. The late Patrick Crichton lobbied fiercely and energetically and produced the first newsletters, which Sandy Pittendreigh published, constrained only by the Committee's reluctance to spend money on glossy or coloured editions.

Fundraising was never CUSSAG's primary aim; that was something best left to professional fundraisers. However, social functions did raise money and CUSSAG purchased a long-case clock for the Cairncross Room, computer equipment for students and also assisted with other projects.

The 2005 Chairman, Professor David Hannay, was a staunch Committee member and a member of several CUSSAG sub-committees from 1997. His knowledge of and links with universities proved invaluable. In 2003 he and his wife Janet hosted a very successful summer party at Kirkdale.

The CUSSAG Committee could not have continued without the invaluable assistance offered over the years by many outside bodies, including:

Penman Engineering
Dumfries and Galloway Education Department
The Holywood Trust
Crichton Development Company
Dumfries and Galloway Council
The University of Glasgow
The University of Paisley
Bell College
Dumfries and Galloway College
Barony College

None of the aims would have been realised without the continuing support of CUSSAG members. Last but by no means least were the spouses, who were often the ones to make the sandwiches, pour teas, wash dishes etc. at fundraising events. Their invaluable supporting role must not be forgotten.

In 1999 an advisory board was set up by the Principals of the Universities of Glasgow and Paisley to coordinate strategy on the Crichton Campus and to have a lobbying function. In 2000 the Crichton Foundation was established with substantial funding from the previous Crichton Endowment Trust, with a role in raising awareness and fundraising. By 2005 it seemed that these two bodies had superseded the functions of CUSSAG and it was decided that the time had come for CUSSAG to be wound up.

Apart from their obvious enthusiasm and talents, CUSSAG Committee members all had to develop one thing: a very thick skin. There were even challenges and accusations that they were trying to steal the Crichton Hospital away from the patients. Although those suggestions were soon rebutted, apathy and even hostility in the local population became a problem. However, as CUSSAG's voice grew stronger, others began to take heed and the green shoots started to appear. That was what encouraged CUSSAG members to continue the struggle for ten years. Without CUSSAG there would be no Crichton University Campus; that was the sole aim of CUSSAG members and it is their continuing legacy.

At the winding up of CUSSAG in 2005, it was decided that the remaining funds should be used to found an annual CUSSAG Award, to be allocated on grounds of need, merit and local considerations. It is hoped that the history of this small contribution might inspire its recipients to succeed regardless of any obstacles that fall in their path to future success.

RA
March 2009