

Reading Düsseldorf Association – AGM, 5 November 2009

Mr Mayor

The item of “Other Appointments” does not usually appear on the AGM agenda. But I have added it this year, to enable me to make a special proposal that I hope the meeting will approve, although I’ve not publicised my intention to make it.

My proposal is that Martyn Allies be appointed an Honorary Vice-President of the Reading Düsseldorf Association for life.

As I understand it, the position of Honorary Vice-President was invented by Martyn himself in order to show appreciation of Harold King’s contribution as our Secretary from 1964 to 1987, which was when Alec Hayton succeeded him in this position. There’s no doubt that Harold had done an enormous amount of very valuable work. He had completed forty years of membership, which even Martyn has not quite achieved yet. After Harold’s death we appointed his widow Phyllis to the position, and she was our last surviving founder member.

But I’ve hesitated for several years to make this proposal, because as I understand it Martyn had an ulterior motive in creating this position. He had recognised that Harold was no longer able to do all he had done, and indeed was becoming a bit of an obstacle to further progress. I wasn’t involved at that time, so I don’t know the full facts, but some of the committee meeting minutes from that period do look as if Harold was no longer firing on all cylinders. So Martyn introduced the role of Honorary Vice-President as a subtle message to Harold that it was time to withdraw from further active involvement.

It’s because of that ulterior motive that I have hesitated. I have never wanted to give that message to Martyn himself, and I don’t want to give it now. His contribution is not just in the past, it is still continuing and highly valuable. But I hope Martyn himself would recognise now that he is slowing down a bit, mentally from almost the speed of light to something more like the pace of ordinary mortals, and I hope that he will accept this proposal as a pure expression of our deep thanks and appreciation for all he has done, with no hidden messages at all.

Martyn first became involved with Düsseldorf when he was posted near there as a Group Captain in the RAF. I believe he bought the house in Caversham well before he retired from the service, but I don’t actually know whether that was before or after he knew of the link with Reading. The first record I have found is something very unusual for him – he sent his apologies for absence from our committee meeting on 26 April 1974. That was while he was still with the RAF, from which he retired just under a year later. He became our Chairman in 1977, a position he held for 21 years.

I believe he had a great deal to do with the thirtieth anniversary celebrations in 1977, and in particular he started the process of re-orienting our work from simply running the Young People’s Exchange towards encouraging other groups and organisations to make links with Düsseldorf. He also had a lot to do with the annual Newsletter which was first published in 1978, although that issue was actually edited by Sylvia Clarke.

Martyn has always done a great deal to develop and maintain links. I’m told that his favourite technique was to write to let’s say the Reading Tiddlywinks Club to say that the Düsseldorf

Tiddlywinks Association wanted to exchange with them, at the same moment as he wrote an equivalent letter to Düsseldorf. This worked surprisingly often, and quite often the mild deception was not discovered or at least caused no problems.

Martyn has also always been very good at getting people to do things. Not only does he ask people in a way that makes them think they are getting a great offer, he also follows them up in a well-organised and tactful way. I really wish I had his level of skill. And he is a constant source of initiatives and ideas.

I'm not going to go into a lot of detail about what he has done. That would be to describe the history of the last 35 years of the Association. There may have been things that happened that Martyn did not initiate, but even then he drove them onwards. They were years in which we changed from an old friendship to a full twinning recognised here and in Düsseldorf, and in which thousands of people made new friendships and travelled between here and there.

This will not be the first time that Martyn has been honoured in various ways. It was while I occupied your chair, Mr Mayor, that he was chosen to be an Honorary Freeman of the Borough. There were other new Freemen appointed on the same occasion, and I was asked to propose them all formally from the chair, but in Martyn's case I knew that his services well deserved that honour.

Less than six months later I accompanied him to Germany when he received the Verdienstorden of the Land of North Rhine-Westphalia. I translated his citation as follows:

“For especial merit in the development of German-British relations

Mr Allies has decisively advanced the fruitful association between the towns of Reading and Düsseldorf. Thanks to his great personal dedication, numerous meetings and friendships between citizens, church congregations, choirs, sports clubs, teachers and school pupils have been made possible. Mr Allies has been a member of the Reading Düsseldorf Association since 1973, and has been its Chairman since 1977. Numerous fixtures in cultural, social and sporting areas derive from his activity. He has thus achieved an important contribution to understanding between peoples through the promotion of contacts which leap over boundaries.”

I don't know who wrote that citation, but whoever it was got it about right. There are many people who have served us well for many years, some of them here tonight, and I wish we could recognise them all. But I hope all members of the Association will agree that Martyn richly deserves to be an Honorary Vice-President, and I so move.

Robert Dimmick