

the simplified spelling society

newsletter. August 1995. [N9]

Published by the Secretary. Bob Brown

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Meeting dates 1995/6

15 July 1995, 21 October 1995, 20 January 1995, 11 May 1996 (AGM)

1. AGM closes “one of the Society’s quieter years”

The Annual General Meeting of the Simplified Spelling Society was held on 29 April 1995. It was preceded by a fascinating presentation on computers and spelling by Dr Roger Mitton of Birkbeck College, University of London [see separate report].

In his usual round-up of the year, Chairman Chris Jolly noted that the Society had been quieter than usual of late, though we had continued to produce a *Journal* regularly with the much-valued assistance of Kenneth Ives in Chicago.

The Chairman also praised Chris Upward as by far the most active member of the Committee, keeping our public persona ticking along in myriad ways. Looking forward, Chris Jolly said that he expected the Society to produce more material in 1995, and perhaps the time is right to consider again the idea of organising a conference.

One possibility, that has been discussed on a number of occasions in Committee, is to bring together dictionary-makers internationally to debate their *defacto* (if mostly unsought and often unrecognised) role as arbiters on spelling. As usual, the Society is willing and able to sponsor this kind of event — all that is required is someone with the skills and energy to organise it.

Membership

Earlier the meeting had received apologies from Bob Brown, who regarded himself as one cause of our "quiet year." He had been living and working abroad for most of the year, leaving little spare-time to devote to the Society. He has now returned to London.

Bob reported that membership stood at about 115. There were rather too many overdue subscriptions, but he would now get around to chasing them.

Finances

Alun Bye apologised in writing to the meeting for his health being rather too fragile to permit him to attend in person this year. Bob Brown read Alun's comprehensive treasurer's report, which was then formally accepted.

The meeting discussed various aspects of our finances, but without in the end expressing any wish to change present investment arrangements. The subscription was left at £10 for 1996.

Editorial issues

Chris Upward delivered a lengthy Editor-in-Chief's report, beginning by noting that Ken Ives still continued to edit the *Journal* from Chicago, long after his initial offer to take on a couple of issues. Chris' continuing gratitude for Ken's generosity was echoed by the meeting as a whole.

However, Ken Ives has now expressed a wish to stand down as editor from the end of the 1995 volume, and editorship will then return to the UK. An important task for the Committee during this year will be to find a successor to guide our "flagship" publication.

Chris Upward noted that, in addition to traditional journals, the Society was also beginning to publish in the most modern way — the text of our information leaflets is now available on the Internet and has already been accessed by enquirers in several countries. We hope to do more in this area as the "information superhighway" develops and becomes more widely accessible.

[Various other detailed points noted by Chris appear as short news items elsewhere in this newsletter.]

Formalities

The rest of the meeting was given over to the necessary formalities of electing a committee and officers for the next year and setting dates for meetings. Details of both appear below.

The AGM is as much an opportunity for involved members to get together for discussion as it is a formal occasion — and there was plenty of talking, before during and after the lengthy meeting and its lunch-break!

2. The inevitability of phonetic spelling

An open letter from Stanley Weatherall

In a recent letter to the Secretary, Stanley Weatherall included a compilation of extracts from a wide variety of sources on the topic of phonic-based or phonetic spelling. His contention is that only phonetic writing systems make sense. The heart of the letter is reproduced here as it may be of interest to other members.

The Minutes for the AGM refer to Chris Jolly's work in promoting phonic methods of literacy teaching (presumably before returning to the hotchpotch of current orthography), but nowhere has there been any reference to my work in taking phonetic (alphabetical) spelling to its logical conclusion.

The following appeared in the article "Rescue bid for bad spellers" by the Society's Editor-in-Chief on page 28 of *The Sunday Times* — *Wordpower Part 1 Literacy*. The paragraphs are numbered for ease of reference.

"Have the anomalies of English spelling finally had their day?"

1. Other countries have taken the plunge. All is not well with English spelling. A recent test showed that 83 percent of British people could not spell six common words correctly (*necessary, accommodation, sincerely, business, separate, height*). Office workers misspell key words in daily use. A British education minister would penalise children's misspelling, but is caught writing *advise* for *advice*. Even dictionaries, the ultimate authority, dither, allowing choice between *organize/organise, encyclopedia/encyclopaedia, yogurt/yoghourt/yoghurt*, though not between *accommodate/accomodate*, where millions would welcome it.

2. The English language has about 40 different sounds, but only 26 letters to spell them. Yet it uses the letters in over 400 unpredictably different ways. Freaks like *one, who, friend, busy* break every rule. A common pattern, *sh in ship*, competes with almost 20 others, as in *sugar, champagne, schedule, conscious, ocean, special, issue, ration, passion, pension, Russian, negotiate, luxury, anxious*. Many spellings stand for other sounds too, like *ch in chip, chef, chaos, loch spinach, yacht*.

3. Why is *delight* spelt like *light*? The earlier spelling, *delite*, came from the French, which has no gh. Chaucer's *yland* took s from the French *isle* to give *island*. French then dropped the s as misleading leaving English with an even more misleading s. The word *ptarmigan* has a p because someone apparently thought the *Gaelic tarmachan* derived from Greek. Dr Johnson respelt *ake* as *ache* for similar reasons.

4. Yet such irregularities are often treated as sacrosanct. Where do our priorities lie? Should our spelling be primarily a museum of ancestral errors or a practical system of communication, easily learned and used by all?

The Society's own leaflets include the following:

The need to modernise.

5. Spelling is a system for giving words recognisable visible form. If it uses letters of the alphabet consistently to represent the sounds of a languages such a system is easy to learn and to operate, but the more inconsistently it uses letters, the more difficult it becomes.

6. For two reasons, spelling systems tend to become out of date: pronunciation changes in the course of time, so that sound and spelling cease to match; and technological and social changes create new requirements.

7. Most languages have modernised their spelling systems this century, but English has scarcely done so for the past 300 years and its written form is antiquated.

Does English spelling need simplifying?

8. In fact, it is nearly 1,000 years since English had a fairly coherent, consistent spelling system. Its spelling today is more of a hotchpotch of contradictory minisystems which are laboriously drilled into learners until they accept them uncritically.

9. Unfortunately success in the modern world depends on literacy, and English spelling is so complex that even after many years of schooling most people still have only a shaky command of it, and tens of millions are functionally illiterate.

10. Even in the hands of professionals it is a cumbersome, uncertain instrument and it is less than ideal for the new technologies.

11. Now new demands are being made on it: as the prime medium of world communication, English has to be learnt by hundreds of millions of non-native speakers. Their access to the language is seriously hindered by the mismatch between speech and script, which arouses ridicule, anger and frustration. Native and non-native speakers alike stand to gain from its simplification.

Introducing simpler spelling

12. Such a complex, world-wide system of communication cannot be revolutionised overnight. Awareness first has to be spread of the benefits of simplification. Greater consistency would make learning easier and more effective. There is a strong incentive for schools to teach a new generation a range of simplified spellings and for publishers to provide texts using the simpler forms. In this way, simplified spellings could enter into general use.

The following extracts are taken from "Writing systems: why and how they need to be studied" by Christopher Upward, the Society's Editor-in-Chief, included in the Aston Papers in Language Studies and Discourse Analysis No. 3

13. Just as polluted air reduces the physical efficiency of the body, so systematically polluted text reduces the intellectual efficiency of the mind.

14. Here we have another general message for the study of writing systems in all times and places, that literacy gives power and leaves the illiterate relatively powerless; opposition to its spread has thus often been explicitly associated with opposition to the dispersal of power.

15. This innovation [the alphabet] had revolutionary implications for human literacy in the long term. Firstly it offered a writing system whose few symbols (its letters) could be quickly learnt by anyone without years of apprenticeship. Secondly, the use of the signs was determined not by some mysterious law handed down from on high, but in a transparent and predictable way by the speech sounds that were part of every person's experience.

16. What the alphabet meant was that if you know the sound values of the phonographic signs, you can in principle write down any word you wish to communicate and read any known word you come across in writing.
17. Certainly, once a well-designed alphabetic writing system has been learnt, it gives the learner untrammelled scope for self-expression and written communication: whatever can be thought and spoken in words can also be written and read without reference to a higher scriptorial authority.
18. Such individualism is an aspect of the story of ancient Greece and Rome, and in modern times alphabetic writing systems are a medium through which literacy, mass education, economic liberalism and democracy are achieved.
19. The critical examination of writing systems thus implies asking what function they have in a society, both in theory and in practice. If they permit universal literacy, they provide the foundation for a civil society in which all can participate. If they obstruct universal literacy, those who are denied its full fruits are imprisoned within more limited horizons and are ipso facto deprived of the rights of active citizenship.
20. English spelling is recognised worldwide as constituting a severe problem for learners and users generally, attracting verdicts like "The world's most awesome mess" (Mario Pei) or "An insult to human intelligence" (Mario Wandruschka).
21. From straightforward origins over 1,000 years ago, English spelling has steadily degenerated ever since, above all thanks to massive admixtures from other writing systems, most notably French and Greek (as transliterated through Latin) which both use letters according to quite different rules from native English (the alien use of letters in the spellings *blancmange* and *psychology* well illustrates the point).
22. The few examples of unpredictable spelling just given are in no way exceptional, but are fundamentally characteristic of the way the English language is written; and the categories of irregularity described represent merely the tip of a large iceberg. No other major language has a writing system that uses the alphabet with remotely comparable unpredictability.
23. The prime motivation for the study of writing systems needs to be the conviction (commonplace enough one would have thought) that literacy is of critical importance for the fulfilment of individual lives and for the attainment of social well-being.
24. There have been comparative studies showing that standards of education in English speaking countries lag behind those elsewhere. There have been comparative studies showing that individuals find the acquisition of literacy skills far harder in English than in other languages.
25. There is widespread, indeed growing, concern about standards of literacy in English speaking countries, alongside profound and bitter disagreement as to the best way to teach literacy skills in English. Indeed this disagreement might be better described as confusion, as methodological fashions swing from one extreme to another (from phonic to visual and back again) without, it appears, solving the problem of effectively teaching the young the skills of literacy in an alphabetical writing system whose chief characteristic should be its simplicity.
26. An incidental finding of the research into effects of the i.t.a. (Initial Teaching Alphabet) was perhaps more disturbing than its main conclusion that regular writing systems are more easily mastered than irregular: it was the suggestion that being forced to learn a fundamentally irregular writing system actually damages the intellectual development of the young learner, by comparison

with the training in accurate observation and logical thinking which mastering a regular writing system entails.

27. The specific problems of English are of enormous importance, in the first place for standards of education in English speaking countries, but perhaps no less importantly for the future of English as the prime medium of international communication.

28. The lack of a predictable correspondence between the written and spoken forms of words causes difficulty, especially for learning the correct pronunciation of words.

29. This paper has implicitly argued that the study of writing systems should be undertaken in a humanistic spirit and with a sense of social responsibility.

30. Writing is a way of representing language, whose ultimate manifestation is the spoken word and the pronunciation of words changes through time, sometimes very slowly, sometimes with bewildering rapidity (as English did in the 15th century). If a writing system was originally designed to match the sounds of speech remains unchanged despite such changes in pronunciation, then it loses the transparency of reflecting the spoken word; and then difficulties begin to set in.

31. So even the best designed, most modern writing system requires careful monitoring to ensure it can be kept up to date.

The Society's Newsletter of January 1993 included the "Ten Axioms (self-evident truths) on English Spelling as follows:

32/1 Alphabets provide the simplest way to write most languages.

33/2 The alphabet works by the principle that letters represent speech sounds.

34/3 Literacy is easily acquired if the spelling tells readers the pronunciation and the pronunciation tells writers the spelling.

35/4 Pronunciation changes through time, undermining the match between spelling and sound.

36/5 Spelling systems need modernizing periodically to restore the sound/ spelling match.

37/6 By not systematically modernizing over nearly 1,000 years, English spelling has lost touch with the alphabetic principle of spelling matching sound.

38/7 Neglect of the alphabetic principle makes English spelling exceptionally difficult.

39/8 The difficulty of English spelling wastes time and produces unacceptably low levels of literacy in English-speaking countries.

40/9 To improve literacy, English needs to modernise its spelling as other languages do.

41/10 There are no quick or easy solutions. As a first step, the idea of "managing" English spelling, that is, controlling it rather than letting it continue on its own arbitrary way, should be adopted.

I add the following from Linguistics by Jean Aitchison:

42. Clearly, the conventional written forms are most unsatisfactory, since they often provide little guide to pronunciation.

Also from an article by Keith Waterhouse in the Daily Mail:

43. The purpose of writing is to communicate and bad spelling hampers communication in that it makes the head swim. Reading is there to be read, not translated from a jumble of letters apparently drawn at random out of a Scrabble Set.

It is quite clear that paragraphs 1 to 41 set out the Society's views as to (a) the anomalies of English spelling, (b) the need to modernize, and (c) that literacy is of critical importance for the fulfilment of social well-being.

I should explain how my own very deep interest and conclusions on the spelling mishmash developed over many years.

At the age of 3 years, I lost my right ear drum as a result of complications after measles, with the consequent need to jockey for position in order to hear clearly and the constant switching from good to poor hearing gave me some understanding of what a handicap is really like, hence my very real concern for the sufferings of the tens of millions of functionally illiterate people.

In my teens, I learnt a system of shorthand in London. The Pitman's record is 300 words per minute over a 5 minute period. It is impossible to write at the more general speed of 120 words per minute and above if hindered by irregular spellings, hence the need to spell as instantly comes to mind, in other words, phonetically.

During the second world war I spent a lot of time decoding corrupt signals, which concentrated my mind on the need for accurate coding and transmission.

Afterwards I devised Alphahand, my own system of phonetic shorthand starting with the Roman alphabet, immediately followed by signs for the missing sounds in the English language. This entailed an in-depth study of the sound/sign relationship and enabled students to see through the system from day one.

The realization that phonetic spelling was entirely regular and free of inconsistencies led me to devise a complete English alphabet using familiar longhand symbols in place of shorthand signs in such a way as to correspond with the primary pattern of our language as spoken.

Writing systems are derived from vocal sounds and there is no justification for meaningless attempts to force English spelling into a series of foreign mini-systems.

With reference to paragraphs 4 and 12 above, I cannot believe that anybody would disagree with the need to have a practical system of written communication, easily learned and used by all; also that awareness first has to be spread amongst the main body of people as to the need for a complete alphabet to mastermind our spelling.

I would modify paragraph 17 by substituting "alphabet" for "alphabetic writing system". All that is needed is a once-only assimilation in early childhood of the complete alphabet to integrate symbol usage into the same mental process as prompts the spontaneous expression of sounds in fluent speech. In reverse, readers can then interpret written words in the same effortless way as when spoken. In other words, the spelling of every word in our vocabulary is already in the mind for the taking and there is no further need for textbooks and spelling classes.

Cut Spelling simply adds more confusion to current spelling and is most unsatisfactory, since it provides no guide to pronunciation. New Spelling 90 has not been carried through to a logical conclusion and lacks the consistency necessary for the compilation of a complete alphabet.

3. IN BRIEF

[Madhukar Gogate: see [Journals](#), [Newsletters](#)]

Roman Lipi Parishad

RLP has campaigned tirelessly from Bombay for many years for the use of the Roman alphabet to represent a number of Indian languages that currently use diverse scripts. Its main activist, Mr Gogate, has now decided to retire, and RLP has been wound down. He has presented the Society with an information pack on the work of RLP for our archives.

Ron Hofmann

Professor Th. R. Hofmann has been a distinguished member of the Society for many years, corresponding from various Japanese universities, and contributing a number of *Journal* articles. It is with surprise and regret that we have heard indirectly that he is thought to have died. It has not been possible to corroborate this yet. An obituary will appear once the facts are clear.

Angus Dalglish

The Society is also sad to hear that Mr Dalglish passed away early in December 1994. He had been a trustee for many years, before standing down from that role a couple of years ago. It seems that he was a passive supporter of our cause, but if anyone knew him, please tell the Secretary so that we can carry a suitable obituary.

Standard spelling?

The British Standards Institution, on behalf of the International Standards Organisation (ISO), has expressed interest in principle in the concept of a standardizing international spelling for English, hopefully leaning towards rationalization. The issue is being actively pursued, to see what influence the Society may be able to have.

[Susan Baddeley: see [Journals](#)]

Dictionnaire historique de l'orthographe française

Our long-standing member Susan Baddeley, living in Chartres, has been a major contributor to this seminal work on the history of French spelling, now published at last.

Journal index

Nick Atkinson has agreed to take on the task of compiling a cumulative index to the *Journal* since 1979. This will be circulated to members in due course.

House of Lords

The Society was pleased to note that Lord Simon continues to campaign on our behalf in Parliament, recently raising spelling issues in the Lords.

Cut Spelling can be Queen's English too

We were pleased that the Queen's English Society has carried a two-part article by Chris Upward in their journal — in [Cut Spelling](#).

Application for IBM award

The Society has made an application for resources under the Community Connections Award scheme organised by the computer company IBM. About ten organizations with projects judged beneficial to society will receive awards of computers, software and assistance in using them. The project we have proposed involves establishing an Internet server for the Society which would offer a free service to net users in transliterating traditionally — spelt text to simpler alternative spellings. This could also be used as a research tool by the Society. Let's keep our fingers crossed!

Dickens, Pickwick Papers.

“Do you spell it with a V or a W?” enquired the judge. “That depends on the taste and fancy of the speller” replied Sam.

[Roger Mitton: see [Journal 20](#), Item 3]

4. AGM Address: English Spelling and the Computer **Dr Roger Mitton, Birkbeck College, University of London**

This year the AGM was preceded with a fascinating address by Roger Mitton, a long-standing member of the Society and an expert on computerized spellchecking and associated language processing tasks.

Most of us know little more than the simple spellcheck facilities of our word-processors, which often suggest alternatives for words they do not recognise — sometimes spectacularly offbeat or surreal alternatives! We also know that the computer cannot usually identify "real word errors" of the kind where we write in when we meant if. Typically these represent 30 percent or so of errors.

Those who sneered at spell-checkers were in for a shock when the full complexity of the process was unfolded. Roger Mitton began by explaining a little of the history of how spell-checkers — with or without dictionaries — were developed and improved, but concentrated mostly on the latest methods and the most promising work being undertaken to improve orthographic processing. At one point he had the assembled audience working as a team on a directed graph-traversing problem. I am still not quite sure why, but it was fun to "look under the bonnet of the word-processor for a while.

Roger Mitton's book on the subject, with the same title as above, is in progress at present. Expect to see it announced here when available.

5. Founding Fathers:

who were the men who launched the Simplified Spelling Society?

Chris Upward investigates. This section of the article is right in the Cutting Spelling.

GOMs of the SSS

Readers who recall the SSS's notepaper of ten years or more ago may remember the small print under the heading *The Simplified Spelling Society*. Here were listed the names of various of the Society's Grand Old Men of the early 20th century, now likely to be unknown to all but the oldest of today's generations. One line on the notepaper stated: "Founded in 1908 with William Archer, F J Furnivall, Israel Gollancz, AW Pollard and W W Skeat." How were these predecessors of ours, the founding fathers of the SSS?

This article highlights a serious inadequacy (from our point of view) in the most widely available biographical data about them, gives some indication of their general eminence, and recalls some of their specific contributions to the SSS.

Spelling ignored in biographical reference works

All of those five names are the subject of entries in *The Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB, Oxford University Press, various dates), *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography* (CDNB, Oxford University Press, 1992) and *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (OCELit, ed. Margaret Drabble, 1985). Yet in only one of the entries (Furnivall in the DNB) is there any reference to their subjects' concern with English spelling and its reform. We can but speculate whether this is a reflection of their general disregard in recent decades for spelling reform in the English-speaking world, or whether spelling reform played so small a part in the multifarious and sometimes enduringly important activities of these men that, within the confines of a short article, it genuinely did not justify a mention. It is also true that in some cases, as we shall see, their involvement with the SSS came at the very end of their lives.

William Archer (1856–1924)

We learn that William Archer grew up in Edinburgh but spent part of his boyhood in Norway. From 1879 he became a drama critic in London, where he promoted Ibsen (whom he translated) and G B Shaw. He wrote several books about the theatre, was one of the early proponents of a National Theatre, and helped found the Stratford-on-Avon Shakespeare company. In 1923 he had a play of his own produced to acclaim, first in the US, and then in London. CDNB further tells us that he campaigned against theatre censorship. From these details we may deduce that William Archer had a spirit of radicalism and innovation about him.

He is best known to the SSS as co-author (along with German-born Walter Ripman) of the original New Spelling scheme, which was the Society's flag-ship reform proposal at least until the 1960s (some would argue that, through its descendant Laurie Fennelly's NS90, it still is). The first edition of NS appeared as a pamphlet in 1910, with three further editions being brought out in subsequent years. In 1940 it first (?) appeared in book form, "completely revised and in part rewritten" by Harold Orton. The classic 6th edition of New Spelling appeared in 1948, nearly a quarter of a century after Archer's death, with a number of further changes, to which Daniel Jones also contributed; but it still bore the names of William Archer and Walter Ripman on the cover as principal authors. A few small changes to reconcile certain British and American variations were agreed at a joint Anglo-American meeting in 1956.

William Archer also wrote several pamphlets for the Society. In these he marked himself out from most spelling reformers by practising what he preached: his pamphlets are right in their original form of New Spelling, and constitute, as far as the present writer is aware, the most extensive published material existing in NS.

[SSS Pamflet 2](#), *I Hav Lurnt to Spel*, bers th imprint "Furst publisht Desember, 1908. Reprinted Janueary, 1941 ". It has a modest 4 pajes (plus covr), and ofrs a ranje of replys, many stil valid, to th kinds of ignrnt and prejudiced objection to spelng reform wich wer comnly herd in those days — as they stil ar today.

[SSS Pamflet 3](#), Dhe Etimolojikl Arguement, bers th imprint "Furst publisht March, 1909. Reprinted Janueary, 1941 ". It has 16 pajes, and altho ritn in a styl rathr mor latnat than todays tastes may be acustind to, it presents a forceful, vividly ilustrated case against th vew that english spelng reform wud destroy valubl etmlojicl infrmation containd in TO. It is stil wel worth readng, its argunints being as valid today as evr.

[SSS Pamflet 4](#), Dhe Eesthetic Arguement, bers th same imprint as Painflet 3. It has 20 pajes, and is a litry tour de force, sparklng with mordnt wit, cojent lojic and forml elegnce of expression redlnt of a richly litry cultur we hav larjly lost in our modm mass-media aje. On first readng, its points may seem dated, insofar as esthetic questions of buty ar no longr of such public concern; but if we interpret them as relating to th syclojicl impact unfamilir speings hav on th uninitiated readr (ie, ar reforind spelngs ugly?), they stil hav an importnt mesaj for us nearly 90 years later.

Perhaps th SSS shud considr reissuing William Archers Painflets 3 and 4, both for th continuing relevance of ther argunints, for th jenrl quality of ther riting, and as specimns of th orijnl NS, with wich many SSS membrs today may be unfamilir.

[SSS Pamflets 5](#) (A Breef History ov English Spelng) and [6](#) (Dhe Proez and Konz ov Rashonal Speling) appear as continuations of th same series. Pamflet 5 ("Furst publisht 1914/Reisued 1942") also uses NS, but dos not admit to an authr, and both its mor scolrly content and its less dashng styl sujest it may not hav been ritn by William Archer. It is today superseded, and hujely surpasd, by curent SSS Presidnt Donald Scraggs classic *A history of English spelling* (1974). Pamflet 6, published 1942, was adaptd from an intrvew givn by William Archer to th Daily Chronicle in novembr 1911. Its 10 pajes consist mainly of a dialog, in wich Archer explains and defends NS; questions put to him in TO, altrnate with his replys in NS.

Ther is a good, recent biografy of Archer by Peter Whitebrook (*William Archer.. a biography*, Methuen, 1993) wich was exerptd in th SSS Newsletter of April 1994.

F(rederick) J(ames) Furnivall (1825–1910)

For Dr F J Furnivall, we wil draw on William Benzies exlnt biografy (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1983), rathr than confining ourselvs to OCELit and th DNBs. He was truly one of th jiants of th victorian era, with major comitmnts ranjing across workrs and womens education and ryts, sport (especialy roing), editng Old and Midl English texts, establishng numerus litry societis, and layng th foundations for th futur Oxford English Dictionary. He became an agnostic and was no respectr of victorian social conventions jenrly. Abov al, by his infectius enthusiasm he cajoled and inspired othrs to furthr th causes he beleved in. He had contact with, indeed in sevrل cases was a frend of, Robert Browning, Thomas Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, Eleanor Marx (dautr of Karl), John Ruskin and Alfred Lord Tennyson. His contacts with Archer, Gollancz, Pollard and Skeat date bak many years into th 19th century in Skeats case to 1868 at th latest, forty years befor th SSS was foundd. DNBs sole refmce to speing reform relates to th 1850s, and reports:

He supported with enthusiasm the [Philological] Society's proposals for spelling reform, which Alexander John Ellis devised, and always took an active part in promoting such reform, adopting in his own writing a modified phonetic scheme.

Benzie's biography reports that both Furnivall and Skeat were involved in debates on English spelling back in the 1860s and 70s, that Furnivall irritated (pp265–66) his readers by sparring his writings with phonetic spellings, and that he was Vice-President of the SSS on its foundation (which Benzie dates wrongly to 1901, not 1908). On pp266–67 we find the following recollection from AW Pollard:

All his life, of course, Furnivall was a fighter, and I remember at an early meeting of the Simplified Spelling Society.... after I had advocated simplification on a historical basis, the uncompromising firmness with which he told me that the majority of the council were committed to a phonetic basis, and that if I didn't like it I had better go! Of course I didn't go. The meetings of that council were far too amusing, and I remained as an unobstructive opposition, in which capacity I was tolerated because of my usefulness in forming a quorum. Thus one of my mental vignettes of the Doctor (ie Furnivall) depicts him as he sat at the head of the table in the little committee room at Great Russell (sic) Street.

(In 1995 the SSS still met in a little committee room in Great Russell Street.)

(Sir) Israel Gollancz (1864–1930)

OCELit tells us that Israel Gollancz became Professor of English at London University in 1905. He succeeded Furnivall as Director of the Early English Texts Society, helped found the British Academy, and was an outstanding editor of Old and Middle English texts, and of Shakespeare. He was knighted in 1919.

Gollancz took little interest in the SSS, beyond showing up for the first meeting and falling out with Furnivall! — see second part of article.

A(Ifred) W(illiam) Pollard (1859–1944)

OCELit tells us that AW Pollard was for 5 years keeper of the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum, bringing out the key Short-title Catalogue of Books printed in England, Scotland and Ireland 1475–1640. He was also an authority on Chaucer and Shakespeare.

The present writer has no information on AW Pollard's specific contributions to the SSS (other than the quotation from him given under Furnivall, above).

W(alter) W(illiam) Skeat (1835–1912)

OCELit tells us that WW Skeat remains a great name in the history of English literature studies for his pioneering work in preparing editions of Old and Middle English texts (especially Chaucer), some of his editions being reprinted throughout the 20th century. In 1878 he became Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Cambridge. He was also a founding father of English etymology (*Etymological English Dictionary*) and English dialect studies.

WW Skeat was the first president of the SSS (1908–911), and author of its first pamphlet, [*On the History of Spelling*](#), on the cover of which he appears as "Rev. Professor W. W. Skeat Lit.D., LL.D., D.C.L., Ph.D. The bearing the imprint "First published December 1908. Reprinted January 1941", in fact it consisted mainly of two extracts from a lecture delivered in 1902. The first main extract shows how the long vowels of English, as both spoken and written, developed over the past 1,000 years. The second extract concerns the ignorance and misapprehensions even of educated people as to the true nature of English spelling. The tone is confident and assertive, as befits a man who was perhaps the greatest expert on the subject in his day. Though some of Skeat's educational assumptions (eg that every schoolboy knew more about Latin and ancient Greek than about English) are now only of historical interest, the pamphlet as a whole is still well worth reading, both for the information it contains, and for the force of its presentation.

6. ...and what did they do?

Bob Brown has been dusting off the minutes of those first meetings.

Inauguration

[The inaugural meeting](#) of what became the Simplified Spelling Society took place in the York Room of the Holborn Restaurant on Thursday September 10, 1908. Beside the five eminent gentlemen mentioned in the first half of this article, a number of others were present. They were Professor H Stanley Jevons, E P Gaston, J J Monro. There were also two American guests, a 'Visiting Committee' of the American Simplified Spelling Board of New York — founded two years earlier — comprising Professor James W Bright of Baltimore and Dr Charles P G Scott of New York.

Skeat took the chair, and Archer agreed to act as secretary.

Skeat then made an opening speech "mentioning the difficulties that had been encountered in former years by the scholars who had urged a simplification of English spelling. It was now proposed to make a renewed effort ... by means of [founding] a Society which should cooperate with the Simplified Spelling Board of New York, but should adapt to English conditions its constitution and its methods of propaganda."

The Americans responded that and they felt the cause would be much advanced by having a similar organization in Britain, recognizing that methods would have to be somewhat different. Israel Gollancz then threw in a couple of notes of dissent, first quizzing the visitors on their credentials. The response is not recorded, but it obviously satisfied him because he went on to urge that the proposed society "should not tie itself down in its style and title to a policy of simplification, but should adopt a name importing a dispassionate interest in the problems of spelling, rather than a settled conviction as to the need for reform." He proposed that it should be named "The English Spelling Society," and was supported in this by Mr Monro. Furnivall, with support from others, seems to have vigorously opposed this idea.

Skeat then formally invited those present to form a Simplified Spelling Society. An amendment by Gollancz to have his way with the name was defeated, so "all those present except Professor Gollancz" formed the initial committee. Professor Jevons seems to have had a draft constitution already prepared, which was read and voted in by those present.

This initial set of "Constitution and Rules of the Simplified Spelling Society" were unexceptional, merely establishing a membership organization which anyone could join on paying an annual subscription of at least one shilling, with the usual officers and committee. The objectives are the only interesting part: "to recommend simpler spellings of English words than those now in use, to further the general use of such simpler spellings by every means in its power, and to cooperate with the Simplified Spelling Board of the United States of America, founded and incorporated in New York."

The group then appointed Skeat as President, and five Vice-Presidents: Mr Andrew Carnegie, Dr Furnivall, Sir J A H Murray, Dr Henry Bradley, and the visiting Professor Bright. A second meeting was arranged for a month later.

Taking shape

The second meeting brought together Skeat, Furnivall, Archer, Monro, and the two American visitors, and concerned itself mostly with fine-tuning the rules that had been agreed earlier, and discussing a long list of worthies who should be approached and invited to join the society/committee. The final list of nominations, in addition to those present, was: Dr Henry Bradley, W A Craigie, Prof. W P Ker, Prof. H Stanley Jevons, Sir J H Murray, AW Pollard, A S Napier, J S Westlake and Professor Joseph Wright. The meeting also agreed in principle to the formation of a joint "committee of experts" with the American organization to "consider and report upon the scientific basis for the simplification of English spelling."

The Carnegie connection

The third meeting on October 2, 1908, brought together Skeat, Furnivall, Archer, Jevons and Westlake of the Committee, and Dr Scott of the Simplified Spelling Board as a visitor. Scott came bearing two letters from [Andrew Carnegie](#) — the Scottish/American iron and steel tycoon turned philanthropist — written from Skibo Castle, Dornoch, Sutherland. They were both read to the meeting, and are worth quoting fully. The first was addressed to Archer.

I enclose a check *[note spelling]* for £1,000 sterling *[equivalent to at least £25,000 today]* according to my promise to Mr Scott, with a copy of a letter to him. I make no further promises, because everything depends on results. Frankly, we expect some work to be done in the old home.

Mr Scott would tell you that the great state of Iowa has adopted the 600 words as proposed by the Board, and these are used in every state institution from the state university to the public schools.

This is progress.

I congratulate you upon the eminent men with whom you are surrounded, and shall watch anxiously your doings. I hope you will send me copies of all documents produced so that I may keep in touch. We are marching rapidly on the other side and the dear old home is either to join the procession and march, or be left behind.

The second letter to Scott, copied to Archer, dealt with a sensitive point:

I am glad to hear that the Britons are going to form a Society, but I do not wish to be considered as going to furnish all the funds needed, being satisfied that nothing would retard the progress of the cause more than the knowledge that it was the work of an alien. I can only be one of the subscribers. Please make this point clear.

If there had been but one organization, then my fund given in America might have been drawn upon to some extent without injuring the cause, but a separate British society supported by an alien would never do.

Although not explicitly stated in the record, a clear motivation for this series of meetings emerges. From the beginning Scott and Bright either already had the promise of funds from Carnegie, or were sure of their ability to persuade him. With a generous initial 'subscription' in the bank and an American organization gaining momentum, Skeat and Furnivall felt that it should indeed be possible to overcome the earlier 'difficulties' with the reform movement — this was a golden opportunity to renew the effort.

Clearly the funds had been expected, because Archer immediately submitted a budget for the first year's operations which summed neatly to £1,000. The main (recurring) items in this were £65 to rent offices, a £200 salary for Archer, the same for an Assistant Secretary (effectively office manager), and £80 for a typist. Redecorating and furnishing the intended office (at 44 Great Russell Street) was expected to cost £60, and the balance of the Carnegie subscription, plus others that would be collected, was intended to be spent on printing, postage, etc. The budget was approved.

The rest of the meeting concerned itself with firming up the committee based on those who had agreed to serve, and discussing further names who might be invited. These included Dr Gilbert Murray — the famous classical scholar and internationalist — who in fact joined the group in 1909, becoming President on the death of Skeat in 1912, which position he held until after the Second World War.

Busy days

The office must fairly have hummed with activity that autumn. By the next meeting on November 9, 1908, Archer was reporting that almost 2,000 prospectuses had been mailed to newspapers and a wide range of different persons and groups thought to be interested in spelling. The Society had received coverage in about 50 newspapers, and already had 33 life members, and about 40 ordinary members. The extensive mailing campaign — with addressees numbered in thousands — continued through the winter, enclosing early pamphlets and article reprints with the prospectuses as they became available. No precise membership records are available to us now, but the Minute Book records that by 1914 over 1,500 renewal reminders and appeals were being sent out each year.

Andrew Carnegie continued to provide extensive funds for the Society, despite worrying about the radical nature of its proposals. Along with his £1,000 sent in early 1915, for example, he writes: I shall support no mode of Simplified Spelling that does not advance step by step. I am satisfied that anything like a complete new system is impossible [to implement]. We are making great progress here by taking up twelve words at a time." Funds from him dried up after his death in August 1919, but his place was taken as major benefactor by Sir George Hunter, who donated £2,500 in 1920, for example. But that merits another article.

7. Reviewing spelling schemes

Many members of the Simplified Spelling Society passionately want to carry the concept of spelling reform through to a conclusion. Others harbour a lifelong interest in language and writing systems that leads them to seek more efficient tools than the rather blunt ones we have. Most developers of spelling or writing schemes want to talk to others about them, and want to receive some comment or feedback, preferably from an impartial expert.

The Committee of the Society recently decided to establish a formal subcommittee for the review of reform proposals and schemes, led by Paul Fletcher. This group reviews submissions carefully and responds, usually at length, to the author with a wide range of comments, questions, criticisms, and suggestions. It has been decided to publish brief descriptions of the schemes reviewed in the Newsletter, and the first four appear below.

If you have a scheme for review, please send it to the Secretary, and he will pass on to the Review Subcommittee. That panel will then respond directly to the scheme's author. If any reader wishes to contact the author of a scheme for more information, please do so through the Secretary in the first instance.

Paul Fletcher writes:

The Reform Proposal Review Subcommittee of the SSS has been examining a number of spelling schemes produced by members, summaries of which appear below. Most members have come to the need for reform after long years of teaching children to read, which experience is reflected in their proposals. If your scheme is not mentioned here, please be patient — we have something of a backlog of work.

MACSPEL by Max Gibb

This is a regular, largely phonetic system. To cater for as many English accents as possible, it reduces the 40 basic sounds of English to 30, to represent the minimum number of generally comprehensible sounds used by literate English speakers worldwide. It banishes Q and X from the alphabet. Long vowels are differentiated from their short version by an acute accent or a line under the letter. Double consonants are therefore not needed to denote a short vowel (hopping/hoping).

REAL SPELLING by Stanley Weatherall

In introducing this system, Stanley makes some telling points: he sees our spelling as the greatest restraint of all time on educational progress and draws comparison between the regularity we take for granted in mathematical and musical notations, and the chaos of English spelling, which he compares to a garden choked with weeds. His system adds some Greek letters plus ! for the long English *i*, to the 26 letter alphabet, but avoids accents and diacritics. It therefore caters for every sound with a single letter. Again, there are no double consonants.

The Alexander System by Antony Alexander

The Alexander System uses all the letters of the alphabet, assigning fresh roles to some consonants so that there is one letter for each consonant sound. Thus *c* is used for current *sh*, and *x* for voiced *th*. The vowels largely follow "Continental" practice. Diphthongs are derived from component vowels (*veil*, *ail*, *craun*) except for *ou* (*book*, *bull*) and *u* (*bud*). *U* is also used for schwa. Long versions of short vowels are conveyed by adding an *e*: *raeth*, *foe*, *wield*. *R* is omitted where it is not sounded in RP.

An interesting suggestion is that reformed spelling should be based on the pronunciation of the most internationally acceptable speaker of English, as identified in a worldwide poll, or series of polls.

IMPS by Jessie Wilson

This system is aimed primarily at children, both for reading and writing. It aims to improve spelling by reducing the number of irregularities rather than reforming it radically, as a stepping stone to TO, and to enable people who are literate in TO to be able to learn it easily. It is therefore not entirely regular.

A quick work-out for spelling reform proposals

This limerick by Chris Upward uses each English phoneme at least once, so forms a suitable test-piece for any aspiring reformed spelling scheme.

Fuzzy-opaque Orthographical Visions

There was a poor boy couldn't spell
Half the words in our language too well.
His teachers thought: "Brain-sick!"
Mum and Dad hoped: "Dyslexic?"
Yet the child rashly jeered
"What the hell!"

9. The Vicar writes

by Nicholas Kerr

Some people think I can't spell. Others complain that I prefer to spell words in the way favored across the Atlantic, rather than the British way. Why? Just to be different? (There's nothing wrong with being different; going to church makes me different.) No, and it's not just to wind people up either. It's more considered than that.

I used to teach modern languages. For a time I earned my living teaching Belgians English and Americans French. Then I taught boys in Leicester French and German. One of the obstacles to learning any language is the relationship between the way words sound to the ears, and the way they appear to the eyes. Dutch, German and Italian are very straightforward: even though one letter may represent a very different sound in each language, the relationship of letters to sounds is regular and predictable. French is another matter: how, for instance, can you tell whether the ending *-ent* of a word is silent, as in *ils donnent* (they give), or pronounced, as in *le froment* (the wheat)? Occasionally you find two words like *couvent* (either *sit on* [eggs] or *convent*) which are spelt identically but pronounced differently according to meaning!

Compared to English, however, French is as simple as a game of snap. Consider the words *daughter* and *laughter*. They only differ by one letter, but they don't rhyme. And if you add *s* to *laughter*, the new word sounds like the first, not the second. Take some simple words like *word*, *work*, *worm*. You get these under your hat, then along comes *worn* which, for no obvious reason, does its own thing. It may sound as though I've hurt myself when I say *brown cow*, but I sound surprised when I get to *grown* and *mow*. How is anyone supposed to know?

It is as plain as day to me that there is a problem, though I'm continually surprised how many people deny it. In any case, even if it's easy to identify the problem, the solution is far from simple. I don't think the American dictionary makers went far enough in the last century or so, but they have at least made an attempt to tidy things up by removing unnecessary letters, such as the *u* in *-our* endings (*flavour* becomes *flavor*). They've also dispensed with the doubling of letters in certain cases, such as *canceling* and *traveling* (where the emphasis falls on the first syllable), while keeping it in others like *rebellling* and *compelling*. And even in England the spelling of words is open to change. We no longer spell *governour* with a *u*; nor do we write a *k* at the end of *publick* or *musick*, and where are the forms *shew* and *shewn* (as in "all tickets must be shewn") which used to delight me on my way to and from school forty years ago? Even *phantasy* is now spelt with an *f*, so why not *fotograf* and *telefone*?

I belong to The Simplified Spelling Society, which was founded in the early years of this century to promote the idea of the reform of English spelling. It has members throughout the English-speaking world, and is one of a number of similar societies. The Society hasn't a single scheme of its own, but members are continually proposing new methods. Among these have been two versions of New Spelling, in 1910 and 1990, and most recently *Cut Spelling — A handbook to the simplification of written English by the omission of redundant letters*.

Perhaps the most notable thing the Society has done was to be involved [indirectly Ed.] with the production of a completely new alphabet, specially designed to write English faithfully. This was financed by a bequest of the writer G B Shaw. It is marvellously clear and simple, but so different from our Roman alphabet that it will probably never catch on. On the whole, people don't seem to be able to handle the simple, they prefer things to be complicated. Have a happy summer!

Nicholas Kerr is Vicar of the Anglican parish of The Holy Redeemer, Lamorbey in Sidcup, Kent. He is a member of the Committee of the SSS. This personal statement is reprinted from the August issue of Holy Redeemer's Parish News.