

Good Evening Everyone,

A warm welcome to all of you, to our mayor Dr. Würzner, and our Consul Paul Heardman, for coming to this evening to see out our 60th anniversary year together, I think you will agree – in style.

We are here in a historic building, sitting in the beautiful and famous Spiegelsaal of the Palais Prinz Carl, which appropriately means Room of Mirrors, room of reflections, as ‘reflect’ is what I now want to do in my speech.

I want to talk a little about the history of the DBG, or Deutsch-Englische Gesellschaft, as it was originally called. Going back to 1957 - who was our founder?

You would think that in Germany, a country known for its efficient bureaucracy, this would be easy to find out. But in fact it proved extremely difficult, indeed impossible to find any official documentation. And to this day, I have none.

The former DBG headquarters – in Berlin – had nothing in their archives, and there was nothing in any local archive either. The only documents I had were an article from the RNZ from May 1987 about a grand celebration in the Europäischer Hof of the 30th anniversary of the society. And a copy of a speech - written for that 30th anniversary celebration - by none other than an old friend of mine - Ronnie Hindmarsh. Ronnie was a dear Welsh man, who taught in the Anglistisches Seminar of Heidelberg University and reminded me rather of Richard Burton. He had a huge gravelly voice and a talent for making poetry and literature come alive when he read aloud. He was one of the first people I met when I moved to Heidelberg, and the person who introduced me to Gladys Fischer.

Ronnie wrote in his speech for the 30th anniversary:

‘Like so many other well-established institutions, the precise beginnings of the DEG Rhein Neckar are surrounded in mystery through lack of documentation.

What emerges from memory and questioning is that, 30 years ago, Dame Lilo Milchsack, Founding president of the DEG in Düsseldorf, asked the late Ernst Walz, then head of the English Department at Heidelberg University.....to set up a Heidelberg branch.

When Dr. Walz accepted a chair at one of Britain’s newer universities, he was succeeded as President ...by that indefatigable promoter and supporter of Anglo-German relations, the late Dr. Karl Fischer of the Englisches Institut, Heidelberg.....(and later by) his widow, Mrs Gladys Fischer....whose gracious hospitality is well remembered by dozens of visiting speakers and invited guests.’

Well, Ronnie was certainly right about the origins of the society being ‘shrouded in mystery’, and when researching them had clearly run up against the same problems as I did, but at least in his speech he gave a name - Dr. Ernst Walz. So off I went to the University Archives to find out more about Ernst Walz, only to be informed that he had never been a teacher at any time in the university’s history!

What do you do when you draw a blank? You ‘Google’! And googling quickly established that Ernst Walz had indeed been a prominent figure in the life of the City and was mayor for several years, but he had lived earlier and could not have been the founder.

Back to the drawing board.....

At this point I felt the only thing left to do was to go through all the local newspapers in 1957 and look for an announcement, an article, something, anything, which would solve the mystery. So I went to the RNZ archives. And you know how it is when you are looking for something – you look everywhere, but it is always the **last**, and not the first, place you look where you find it. Naturally I started at the beginning - in January - and worked my way slowly through every month, which took quite some time! Only to find that what I was looking for was right at the end of the year – in December!

And I must give credit here to Rainer Wesch, who runs the RNZ archives. He had come to know me quite well on my many visits (!) and had tried to help me locate the elusive reference I needed. And it was he, and not me, who noticed an article – not about the DEG directly, which is what made it easy to miss - but about the visit of a British Labour politician – Richard Crossman – to Heidelberg to give a lecture at the university. In that article it said that Richard Crossman gave his lecture in honour of: (quote) *‘der gerade zustandgekommene Arbeitskreis Rhein Neckar.’ (the recently formed branch of the DEG)*

No exact date was given, but since the article appeared on the first Wednesday in December, it seems highly likely that the founding took place in late November. Which makes celebrating tonight, in the last week of November, serendipitously very fitting!

In the article, the founder’s name was given as - not Ernst Walz - but Heinz Walz. Eureka! The next day, I found out from the university archives that Dr. Heinz Walz had worked in the English Department of the Interpreters Institute, which is where I now work. He had taught Politics and the Culture of the UK, which is what I now teach. And incidentally, he had taught on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, which are the days I now teach!! Rather a lot of coincidences – unheimlich!

Dr. Walz had become a teacher at a time when Heidelberg was a centre of Nazi propaganda. His classes were hostile to National Socialism, for which he was given a warning, but which he ignored. He was then dismissed by the university and arrested by the Gestapo. Happily, he managed to escape to England, where he settled and married an English woman. During WWII, he was classed in Britain as an ‘enemy alien’ and interned, but later released and allowed to teach German POWs. After the war, he returned to Heidelberg and taught once again at the university here. In 1957, he founded a branch of German English Society, ran it for 10 years, and then moved back to England to take up a post at Surrey University.

We owe this courageous man Heinz Walz a debt of gratitude. He is someone who put his life at risk for his beliefs. He promoted peace and, after the war, reconciliation, and an important part of that was founding this society in Heidelberg. Without him, and then the work of others after him, we would not be sitting here this evening.

The last 60 years of the society have witnessed many changes. In 2006 Renate and I were elected to the posts respectively of Vice-President and President, and a year later Beverley joined us as Membership Secretary. In 2009, the Berlin DEG headquarters, who had been the main organisers and funders of speakers and events since its inception, decentralised and without that funding and overall organisation, many DEG groups across Germany closed down. But we in Heidelberg took a vote amongst the members, and on the basis of that, we chose to continue. That was no easy task since it meant re-founding as an ‘eingetragener Verein’, which required endless bureaucratic preparation, as well as copious legal advice. We could not have managed it without the unstinting support of Ulf Schilling, who gave generously of his time and charged us nothing. Without Ulf, we would also not be sitting here this evening.

So we survived the decentralisation from Berlin, became an 'eingetragener Verein', and went on to find our own speakers and organise our own events. In this we funded ourselves through our membership fees as well as by forming a partnership with the Frankfurt group, who also decided to continue after decentralisation. We decided to save costs by sharing speakers, and Frankfurt are generous with us – they pay the lion's share of speakers' travel costs. Without Frankfurt, we would not be able to offer speakers direct from the UK.

Today the DBG Rhein-Neckar is flourishing – we hold regular talks, with top speakers, as well as organising other enjoyable events - visits to the theatre, outings to exhibitions, wine tasting, and of course parties, like this one. And our membership is steadily growing, despite Brexit! On that note I would like to say that I believe this society has a vital role to play – and we are needed more than ever – to build bridges which may have become wobbly recently and to promote understanding and partnership for the future.

Behind the scenes is the Executive Committee, currently a team of 5, working hard to organise events throughout the year. Our current treasurer, many of you meanwhile know the new boy - Pete, John Burton's son, who came to Heidelberg from London to trace his German roots and just couldn't leave! Andrea Scheinert is a long standing member of the committee in charge of the website, and publicity - she designs poster, brochures, the lovely invitation cards you all received for this event, and the colourful programme cards on your table. Beverley is our super-duper secretary, taking care of the membership and keeping us all in line. Renate is my right-hand, which means she does everything and anything that needs doing – by the way, she and Beverley did the lovely table decorations in this room. And what do I do, you might be asking yourself – well I organise the programme, find and invite the speakers, and take care of them when they come to town. And in my spare time look for nice rooms to have parties in.....

Then there are the extra helpers in the background: Tom Iredale, our first treasurer, who is now our Auditor and also organises our Facebook page. Andy Pelkiewicz, who helps with technical set up. Helga Cantrell and Jutta Krause, who help out on the door at events. And others who have supported us in various other ways – I have already spoken of Ulf's heroic contribution. There is also Axel von Schellenberg, after Ulf, our longest-standing member and a great supporter over the years. And Professor Fletcher DuBois, who sometimes sings for us and who helped me in locating and compiling material for my research about this building.

There were 2 years which had particular highlights for us – 2013 when I launched the project called 'The Wedding', which celebrated the 400th anniversary of the wedding of Elizabeth Stuart to the Prince Elector of the Palatinate, Friedrich.V – a dynastic line from which the current royal family is descended. This project received the Queen's patronage, which of course attracted wide media coverage and put us on the map more than we had ever been. We organised events throughout that year, very successfully, and doubled our membership. This is the year in which we met Paul Heardman, who is the Consul General for this region, and who has since become a friend of the society. We are very happy that he could be with us tonight.

And **this** year of course we will never forget because of the very memorable visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to Heidelberg in July. Thanks to Paul, the Executive Committee was invited to be part of the welcome party, and we were the lucky ones who had the chance to meet this lovely couple in person, which was both a nerve-racking and totally exciting experience all at the same time.

Their visit was well received in the region, and because of it, the society again received wide coverage in the media, global coverage in fact – I think everyone from Asia to America was talking about Renate's cake recipes and Kate's interest in them!

Before the fuss had died down, I was interviewed on national television, which I can tell you, was far more terrifying than meeting Kate and Wills.

Over recent years, the DBG has had celebrations in some impressive and historically significant locations: for example, the Queen's 60th Jubilee in 2012 with over 70 guests in the rather grand Max Weber Villa. The Queen's 90th birthday, which we celebrated last summer at Wolfsbrunnen, the site of an original hunting lodge of Elizabeth and Frederick. We were joined by heads of other DBG groups on that occasion, as well as over 50 members.

We have also held two festive events at the Molkenkur, the original site of the first castle in Heidelberg, a celebration of the 45th anniversary of the Heidelberg-Cambridge Twinning partnership in 2010, and this summer our own 60th anniversary party.

And tonight we are lucky indeed to be sitting in this magnificent room in a historically significant building – one which has a strong connection to Britain. It now belongs to the City, and we have the Mayor's office to thank for the use of this room.

So I would like to conclude now by saying something about this building and telling you a little love story. As most of you know, I am known for my little love stories! Palais Prinz Carl was originally a hotel for noble guests. It was opened 230 years ago (in October 1788) - and took its name from Prinz Karl von Zweibrücken, who was due to inherit the Palatinate from Carl Theodor in the late 18th century. It quickly became a top address for international VIPs, famous people, and royals.

Mark Twain, for example, gave a talk here on American Independence Day 1878 supposedly his text on The Awful German Language. Longfellow stayed here, Lord Byron, and apparently even Casanova.

In September 1861, three famous royal guests alighted at this hotel – Queen Victoria's eldest daughter – Vicky, who at the time was the Princess of Prussia and married to Frederick, heir to the Prussian throne, who accompanied her. And Prince Albert (Bertie), Vicky's brother, and Queen Victoria's eldest son, who later became King Edward VII. Vicky and Frederick stayed here officially, and are on the hotel guest list, but interestingly Bertie, is not on the guest list, because he was travelling incognito. I could only verify that he did in fact stay here despite not being in the hotel records by going to the Stadtarchiv and looking at the local newspaper for that week. On 27th September 1861, the Heidelberg Journal had a tiny reference to the Prince of Wales visiting Heidelberg and staying at the Palais Prinz Carl. Bertie was travelling incognito because he was here on a secret mission, and no one except his immediate family was supposed to know! At the time, Bertie was under a great deal of pressure to find a wife (sound familiar?), and a secret meeting had been arranged for him to "accidentally-on-purpose" bump into Princess Alexandra of Denmark, who was due in Speyer the following day. The meeting was so secret that even Alexandra did not know about it!! She was one of 7 possible eligible candidates for Bertie – a list drawn up by his mother, Queen Victoria. Bertie's brief was to 'bump into Alexandra', engage her in conversation for a few minutes, and afterwards decide if he could imagine marrying her!

The result of this clandestine meeting was that Bertie liked her and eventually proposed. It took him a year to get round to it though - they got engaged the following September, and in Brussels, not in Heidelberg, but nevertheless the rumour abounded that it was here, in this hotel, that they met, fell in love and got engaged. There is even a postcard with a picture of the room where this engagement is supposed to have happened – it is even available on Ebay! You can buy it for about 12 euros! And because of this persistent rumour, the Palais Prinz Carl became something of a place of pilgrimage for Brits travelling in Germany in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Alas the hotel was closed at the start of the WWI, and much of its former glory and elegance was sacrificed during the rebuilding programme. BUT the Spiegelsaal survived, and it looks now as it did then. This room has a long history, and we the DBG have a history. Many people have celebrated here over the last 200 years, and I am very delighted that we can all be together here tonight celebrating our long-standing and fine society. Thank you.