

Report on the Questionnaire on the Suspension and Possible Renewal of the Surname Hodgson Association and Resources Enterprise (SHARE)

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10 June 2006

Summary

Responses to this questionnaire indicate a great deal of regret concerning the closure of SHARE, but also a number of problems with its structure and activities up to 2004. Several respondents suggested that it was previously defined too much in terms of the interests and activities of one leading personality. There is significant support for the idea of reviving SHARE, but there are also indications that its structure and role have to be radically redesigned if its renewal is to be successful. An important conclusion is that a revived Hodgson surname association must offer a wider portfolio of services to attract members.

1. Background

SHARE was formally founded in 1994 and held several gatherings. It also produced a regular newsletter, a comprehensive Master Database on CD-Rom and maintained a website. However, in late 2004 a decision was made by some members of the SHARE committee to take action that was variously described as the “closure”, “hibernation” or “cold storage” of the organisation.

The reason for this action was that much of the activity of SHARE was in terms of the collection and collation of genealogical information, and that this large task had fallen on Bruce G. Hodgson, with inadequate help from others. Bruce had played a major role within SHARE since its inception. He felt gravely overloaded. The Chair of SHARE, David Hodgson, concurred with Bruce that the best action in the circumstances was to suspend the organisation.

Although there was apparently some discussion of the possible reimbursement of membership dues, this did not take place. No action was taken under Clause 9 of the SHARE Constitution, which states: “In the event of SHARE being dissolved, assets shall be donated to a charitable body chosen by the Committee.”

Interest has remained in the Hodgson heritage and genealogy. The SHARE website remained open and earlier in 2006 there was some discussion of reviving the organisation.

As an ordinary member of SHARE (and not a member of its Committee) I took the initiative to consult as many actual or potential members as possible, to appraise the possibilities for a revived Hodgson Surname Association.

2. The Questionnaire

I am in possession of the email addresses of 325 Hodgson surname researchers and contacts, including (probably) most previous members of SHARE. However, some members of SHARE do not have an email address. The following questions were circulated to this email list on 15 May 2005:

- (1) Have you ever been a member of SHARE? If so, roughly when?
- (2) What are your views concerning the decision in 2005 to close down SHARE?
- (3) What are your views concerning the recent proposal to revive SHARE?
- (4) Would you (re)join a revived SHARE? Please give your reasons.

It was stated that all replies would remain confidential.

There were 48 responses to this questionnaire, amounting to a response rate of 14.8 per cent. Of the 48 respondents, 27 declared that at some time they had been a member of SHARE. Of the 27 former SHARE members, 14 had been members since 1996 or earlier.

Below I address responses to each of questions (2), (3) and (4) in turn. I add my own brief interpretations and comments at the end of each section.

3. Responses to Question 2

Question 2 asked for reactions to the closure of SHARE.

Among the 21 respondents that had not been members of SHARE there was a relative lack of concern about the decision, with as many as 11 expressing indifference or lack of knowledge about it. However, a significant minority of non-members expressed strong views. One recognised that Bruce was overloaded but expressed concern whether proper procedures were followed. Six expressed surprise or disappointment.

Among the 27 respondents that were sometime members of SHARE, the responses were generally longer and more concerned, with many expressing surprise, regret or various degrees of disappointment. Here are some extracts:

“a very limited number of people are in control of this entire organization. Suggestions I have made were never given much credence”

“I was sorry to see the organization close shop ... I was not surprised just disappointed, mostly for those who seemed to have put so much effort into it. I just thought that perhaps Bruce marched to his own drummer and that I was incapable of hearing the same tune.”

“I was not particularly surprised when it closed down but I was mildly shocked in the way that it was done. It was also a pity as I felt that there were sufficient people interested to keep it going.”

“It seems ... that the bulk of the work fell on a few shoulders.”

“I think it was shut down too suddenly -- everything seemed to be going fine, then the general plea for help and advice was put out, and just as suddenly the demise was announced. If something needed to be scaled back or temporarily curtailed until somebody could step up to fill in the gap that would have been much better. I empathize with those who had to make the decisions they did, but to the rank and file such as me it seemed shocking and unfair.”

“I was saddened by the decision to close SHARE down ... but understood [that] too much [was] required of too few, particularly Bruce.”

“I was saddened, yet I realise that it would take a lot of work to keep it going. I was not informed or consulted about the decision”

“The organisation had been struggling for a while to get members to help in the active running of SHARE and it was clear that some of the long-standing officials had had enough, wanted to stand down but couldn't find replacements. The final closure seemed to happen rather abruptly with no member consultation.”

“I think the main problem with SHARE is that there were not enough members, and very few who were willing/able to take on the burden of organisation, in particular collecting data and putting them on the website.”

“It provided considerable information that was focused, interesting and useful, and available nowhere else, so it was sad to see it have to close. I should perhaps say that most of my gain came from contacts based on SHARE rather than on any specific material published.”

“I got some really useful information, but that tended to dry up.”

“I was extremely saddened by the closure of SHARE since it was through Bruce Hodgson and SHARE that I found my family in Canada.”

Among others, the following observations emerge from the above extracts:

- *There is significant appreciation of the role of Bruce in helping to lead the organisation and providing valuable information.*
- *There is equally significant concern that too few people were responsible for the activities of the organisation.*
- *There is also significant concern about lack of consultation with the membership and lack of responsiveness to suggestions.*

All three of these observations are consistent with the appraisal that SHARE was defined too much in terms of the interests and activities of one leading personality, who had been largely responsible for the formation of the association in the first place. In its lifetime, SHARE had failed to develop an adequate collective leadership and an inclusive, corporate personality that was a sufficient reflection of multiple individual concerns and priorities.

4. Responses to Question 3

Question 2 asked for views concerning the recent proposal to revive SHARE.

Among the 21 respondents that had not been members of SHARE there were a variety of responses. A few expressed indifference. However, 11 were warmly disposed to the idea of a revival. Some expressed some concerns. One asked what would be done to prevent the organisation collapsing again. Another remarked “SHARE always seemed to have a very narrow focus”. Yet another asked what would happen to the assets of SHARE.

Among the 27 respondents that were sometime members of SHARE, the overwhelming majority were positive about the possible revival, but in other respects the responses were varied. Here are some extracts:

“That would be great! Bruce Hodgson was a big help to me in the past.”

“I always felt that the structure did not really work and that the whole show was driven by Bruce. It would have been better if more people had been involved in the work and if there had been ongoing consultation between everybody. ... I don't think that the massive SHARE database serves any real purpose, at least I could never see the point of it, but of course, I have no knowledge of how often members referred to it. The magazine was quite interesting; could that be revamped into electronic format? I hope that it will be possible to revive SHARE but there is an awful lot of rethinking to be done on its aims and objectives, who is going to do what and how decisions are to be made and implemented. I think today, that success will depend on electronic communication and it makes it so much easier to involve a lot more people.”

“It would have been a shame to see a final demise of the group in to which Bruce particularly has put such a lot of work. I just hope that he will now be able to take more of a back seat. I particularly enjoyed the SHARE reunions ...”

“It would be pointless if [Bruce] alone tried again, [and] he closed it due to overwork. Most of my latter emails to Bruce remain unanswered.”

“A revived SHARE would be welcome, but it will only work if the underlying problem is addressed. It is simply not reasonable to expect Bruce to do so much.”

“a revival would be welcome since most of the material submitted in years past would remain accessible.”

“I never got one iota of information about my English ancestry that could be credited to my membership in SHARE.”

“I would be delighted if SHARE were to resurrect itself, as I always found its newsletter fascinating to read ...”

“I found the newsletters over the last few years to be of poor quality. ... I was sent the SHARE database on CD a few years ago ... but I had great difficulty accessing the database and searching it.”

“I would hope that SHARE would revive, or another organization like it would rise from the ashes, keeping an international community.”

“I would like to see SHARE revived since it is an amazing source of genealogical and historical information. although I do realise how time consuming it must be to keep on top of an International Society with very little funding.”

Among others, the following observations emerge from the above extracts:

- *Again there is significant mention of the role of Bruce and appreciation of his contribution (which of course was unprompted in the questionnaire).*
- *There are concerns that, if revived, the fundamental problems might not be resolved, and the organisation might close down again.*

- *There are mixed feelings about the quality of the SHARE newsletter with a suggestion that it should in future be circulated electronically.*
- *Generally, it is pointed out that the age of electronic communication creates new opportunities for SHARE.*
- *A number of former members suggest that the structure of a revived Hodgson Surname association should be redesigned, to take account of both past mishaps and new electronic opportunities for communication and membership involvement.*

All these observations are again consistent with the appraisal that SHARE was defined too much in terms of one leading personality. They also indicate that a revived association should be redesigned, rather than attempting to re-launch SHARE under its former format.

5. Responses to Question 4

Question 2 asked if respondents would (re)join a revived SHARE.

Among the 21 respondents that had not been members of SHARE, 6 said that they would definitely join a revived association. Another 5 said that their rejoining was possible or probably, but 3 of these said that their joining would depend on underlying problems being addressed. The remaining 10 expressed no significant inclination to join, two of these giving financial reasons for their negative response.

Among the 27 respondents that were sometime members of SHARE, 18 said that they would rejoin. A further 3 respondents said that they might rejoin, with mention of the problem of financial cost. Another 4 respondents said that they would not join. The following extracts indicate some key sentiments:

“Yes I would join a revived SHARE -- To keep the Hodgson name afloat -- I am proud of it. -- To leave a legacy for others. -- To enable people to find their kith and kin. -- To be able to share information with and help others”

“I would consider rejoining the organization if it were restarted. The largest problem that I had with the earlier organization was dues payment.”

“If SHARE is revived, I would consider rejoining but it depends on cost and value for money. Living in New Zealand, my main contact with the association was through the newsletter.”

“Yes, but we would need to know that it wasn’t going to fold again in the near future. People cannot open or close such a venture just because they feel like it.”

“At this point, I would not rejoin SHARE. I left for several reasons -- the articles in the newsletter seemed uninteresting to me and never connected me with anyone researching the same lines. I was notified once of a direct relative but that member never answered any letters or e-mails. There was also the rising cost of membership for the uninteresting newsletter, which seemed to be the only thing I got for my money. Once each year I received a mini-diskette which never once worked in my computers ... so again, a waste of money. Since the annual get-togethers are always in England, I am never able to rub elbows with anyone. I would recommend sub-conferences for each nation ...”

“I would rejoin simply out of commitment to research of the Hodgson name and connection with other Hodgson's interested in genealogical pursuit. But I would hope for a

‘friendlier’ and more ‘useful’ organization. Apart from a small hope of finding a family connection with other Hodgsons, and some of your info on the origins of the Surname, the association wasn't ever really helpful in any way. It was a complicated process to get US funds sent to pay dues. ... There are a lot of things an Association could do, compiling Hodgson records of various kinds, etc - but creating an association just to have one won't be altogether meaningful.”

“Yes. I found this group informative and lively; Very useful for research, interesting histories and the ability for me to share my information.”

“YES. The organisation has accumulated a wealth of information and resources which should not be lost. While I have no time to take an active role now I will research my family one day and may then be prepared to help run SHARE. Meanwhile I would be prepared to help in some small way ...”

“Yes. Reasons are harder to offer beyond expressing appreciation for what it has already done for me, and that as Hodgson forms a previously unknown but very strong line of my ancestry in England ...”

“I would certainly rejoin. I really enjoyed the magazine and the assemblies too.”

“I hoped that through the organization that I would be able to learn more about my ... ancestry. Sadly I gained virtually nothing from the membership experience.”

Among others, the following observations emerge from the above extracts:

- *There is pride in the Hodgson heritage and concern that it information should be shared and not lost.*
- *There is significant appreciation for what SHARE has done in the past.*
- *There are significant worries about the level of membership dues and the cost of transferring funds from one currency to another.*
- *There are also worries that SHARE membership brings limited benefits.*

Clearly, calculations concerning the costs and benefits of (re)joining a revived SHARE are uppermost in the minds of many respondents in making a decision whether or not to rejoin.

Here a problem is that past activities of SHARE were very much concentrated on the “correlation” role, and the concomitant production of a large, comprehensive Hodgson genealogy database. At best, is likely to be no more than a “one off” benefit for any member. When the information is obtained, why continue membership?

A few respondents mention the value of the SHARE gatherings and the newsletter, but the strength of these sentiments hardly indicates that SHARE had an adequately varied portfolio of benefits for members. SHARE was defined too much in terms of one activity. When Bruce became overloaded with this work, SHARE then folded. Not enough people were involved in other activities and too few benefits were offered to actual and potential members.

Several respondents valued the work on the Hodgson DNA Project and the publication of material on the origin of the Hodgson surname. However, one did not have to be a member of SHARE to benefit from these activities. Nevertheless, they were organised with the help of the SHARE network.

6. Concluding Remarks

A large number of respondents indicated their huge appreciation of the work that Bruce put into SHARE in the period up to 2004. I would also like to add my warmest gratitude for what he has done in inspiring the organisation and contributing a huge amount of dedication and hard work. With others, my hope is that this legacy will not be lost.

If it is to survive, SHARE has to be a collective association rather than a one-man-band. Furthermore, the solution to SHARE's problems and the possibility of a revived association do not lie simply in sharing out the work previously taken on by Bruce. An additional problem is that the scope and activities of SHARE were too narrow in their range to attract and retain members. If a revived SHARE defines itself narrowly in genealogical terms then it is likely to fail again.

There is a simple reason for this: *each piece of genealogical information is particular to no more than a group of families, and each Hodgson family is likely to be interested in little more than the information that relates to their own pedigree.* Hence, if the raison d'être of SHARE is mainly genealogical research, then members will look to the organisation primarily in these terms. Once any information available was obtained, then they would have little further need of the organization, other than to hang on in the hope that something new might eventually be discovered. If, on the other hand, no significant information is found, then disappointment with the organisation is likely to follow.

A particular technical point concerning the Hodgson heritage is relevant here. It is important to appreciate that those born with the Hodgson surname do not descend from a single medieval ancestor. There is no single medieval Hodgson from which all Hodgsons are descended. By contrast, DNA and other evidence indicate that some other surnames (such as Sykes) descend (mostly) from a single medieval ancestor. In our case, the DNA evidence indicates a wide diversity of Hodgson roots. In a particular cultural milieu in the North of England around the fourteenth century, where Norse first names were prominent, *multiple families* adopted the Hodgson surname. These families drew their DNA from mixed ethnic sources: from Norway, Denmark, Ireland and Britain. Consequently, the work of genealogical correlation will always remain fragmented: we shall never reach the point where we can construct a family tree that connects a large proportion of Hodgsons together.

To repeat, the revival of SHARE does not depend simply on sharing out the work of genealogical correlation that Bruce took on board. In addition, if a Hodgson surname association is to be revived, then it should not be confined largely to the role of genealogical correlation. Membership levels can only be sustained if the association offers a wider portfolio of services and attractions. We need to consider a wider range of enduring activities that will attract and retain members, and keep the international Hodgson network going.

Your Comments

Your comments on the above issues will be welcome. Please email g.m.hodgson@herts.ac.uk. Unless you indicate otherwise, these comments may be posted on the www.hodgson-clan.net website to stimulate further discussion. Please also indicate if you want your comment posted but wish to remain anonymous.
